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Broken Hearts: Short Stories

A Thesis Presented

by

ANGELIQUE PAPARELLA

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

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May 2016

Broken Hearts: Short Stories

A Thesis Presented

by

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May 2016

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Art

The first time was an accident. Yeah, I know. I'm sure there are plenty of people in prison who say the same thing.

I was living near Boston, in my last year at Mass Art. No, it wasn't my parent's money that got me into school. I earned a full scholarship.

I had a small house a few miles outside of the city, but I spent most of my days on campus, returning home only to grab a change of clothes or a few hours of sleep. I worked weekends at a small photography studio at the mall nearby. They paid barely over minimum wage but I only needed to earn gas and food money.

I was born in August of '78 in Jupiter. Yeah, it's a real place. Google it, for chrissakes. According to my mother, it's full of cockroaches, poisonous snakes and alligators. After an alligator tried to eat me, she packed us up and left Florida and the sperm donor behind. That's how we ended up in Maine. She got as far away from Florida as she could without actually leaving the East Coast.

No, I'm not telling you his name. He has no place in this story. I was three when we left. I had a father. The man my mother loved adopted me and raised me. I never had a desire for any other "father." People have always asked me if I wondered, but I never needed to know. Why would I want to track down a man who really never existed? I don't remember him, don't even have stories to paint a memory with. Therefore, he doesn't really exist.

You probably want to blame this on my parents or some deep, dark secret from my past. It fucking pisses me off the way blame gets thrown around. Oh, poor me, my mother beat me and my father molested me, that's why I'm all fucked up. I'm afraid I have no gory details for you, no

childhood trauma lurking in my closet. I had a pretty boring childhood. We lived in Rockwood, a small town in northern Maine. My parents loved me just fine but they also encouraged me to be pretty independent. I did well in school. I had friends but I loved my own company. I had a kind of freedom that city kids will never know. I was allowed to roam freely and spent hours in the woods, hiking and fishing. I've stood feet from a moose that could have crushed me, swum in magical waterfalls and tossed my echoes to the mountains.

Winters in Maine are pretty rough. The snow comes early and is dumped in great piles that climb to the sills of the windows and barricade the doors. It meant long hours confined to the house. My mother did not believe in television as a babysitter and severely limited the hours I spent in front of it. And she had zero tolerance for the phrase, "I'm bored." I think I was twelve when my mother bought me one of those cheap watercolor sets and some construction paper.

One of the reasons I loved Maine was the colors. The world there is full of colors; each one comes in endless variation. The green of the maple is very different from the green whispers of corn that grew everywhere in the summer. The blue of the morning sky before sunrise, mirrored in dilution on the surface of the lake. The red of a cardinal against a snowy backdrop not anything like the red of a fat robin's proud breast as it struts across a spring green lawn. At that age, I had no words to express my love for the colors of Maine but the cheap paint, as it dripped and dried, allowed me to begin to capture some of the colors.

When the watercolors ran out, I began to draw. I must've driven my parents crazy because I drew on everything. Napkins, notebooks, scrap paper. I drew in the frost on the sliding doors, the fog on the inside of car windows. I covered every available surface of my walls with paper and drew on that. But it wasn't enough. I craved color the way I craved sugar. I could work

without it but every cell in my body cried with want when it was missing. That's my drug, my motivation, my inspiration.

Sounds kinda corny? I told you, simple and boring. The drawing and the outlines mostly came easy for me. Color is the only thing I have ever worked for in my life.

The first time I had the odd feeling that someone had been in my space, I thought I was imagining things. You ever have the feeling sometimes, when you walk into your home, that something is out of place? You might not be able to put your finger on what's wrong, it's just a feeling that creeps over the fine, tickly hairs on your body. Maybe the salt shaker is tipped on its side, or perhaps a chair isn't pushed up against the kitchen table the right way. It wasn't anything I could see, but I had the niggling feeling that something had shifted and was out of place. I chalked it up to paranoia. A single woman who lives alone in this fucked up world is entitled to a minute or two of paranoia. I hadn't been home in two days, and I thought lack of sleep was screwing with my head.

The second time it happened was maybe a week later. My front door had a massive glass pane usually covered by a heavy pair of curtains. Now, however, the curtains were drawn back and I could see into the kitchen. I peered through the window but the sunlight created a mirror that was difficult to penetrate. I slid my key into the doorknob and listened for the click of the tumblers to signify the door was locked. It was.

Nothing that I could see was moved but the feeling was a physical sensation, like someone stroking the sensitive skin on the back of my neck. It was a dirty, greasy touch and I could almost

see a film of shadowy fingerprints dotting the counters and tabletop. I was starting to think I was losing my mind. Too much time alone.

I forgot the feeling as I lost myself in painting. I was working on *Broken Heart* at the time.

Who the hell knows where the ideas come from; they just are. My theory is that there's a hell of a lot of brain we're wasting. I imagine the silent part of the brain is doing something in there, buried beneath that thing we call a subconscious. Nature doesn't waste anything, right? So it's got to be serving some purpose. In my case, the unknown universe in my head vomits images, dreams and bright colors, filling my head until I have to let it out before my skull cracks open.

I used to have this dream, long before the world began to dream so vividly of dying. I'd dream it was night, and I was outside. I was dressed in one of those filmy white nightgowns, the kind of old-fashioned gown worn by some gothic heroine in a 20's film. The hem brushed the top of my feet but there was enough room for the chill of the night to creep up underneath. I stood staring up at the huge silver coin of the moon. There was a vibration beneath my feet, and fear from the trembling earth bled upwards into the soles of my feet. God, it was so real it hurt my heart, made it hard to draw breath into my lungs. Something orange and hot streaked across the sky, igniting the clouds with a false sunrise of pinks and oranges.

The object collided with the moon, a knife of fire penetrating its side. There was a deep boom and the earth shifted, the impact knocking me off my feet. I lay on my back as the grass wept cool dew that soaked through the fabric of the nightgown, chilling my skin. I watched as the silver moon erupted, the wound spewing bloody slivers across the night sky. Who knew the moon bled the same red as we do? It looked like a frozen heart that had shattered into a million jagged, bloody splinters. I would always wake at this point, my skin burning, soaked with sweat. Trapped

in the sheets, trapped in fear that held my body immobile until the terror of the dream evaporated with the sweat.

This was a special canvas. I'd worked on it for nearly ten years. I'd tried over and over to paint the dream away but I couldn't get it right. And it wouldn't go away, I knew, until the canvas was perfect. I couldn't capture the shade of red that bled from the inside of the moon. As usual, I got pissed off and dropped my brushes into a glass on the table beside me.

Hunger was gnawing a pit in my belly by this time and I had a leftover half sub in the fridge that I thought might still be edible. I got the sandwich and a bottle of Coke from the fridge and settled back on the stool to study the painting while I ate. But when I unwrapped the sandwich, I forgot about red.

There was a large bite taken from one corner of the bread. I felt a trickle of cold sweat slide down the base of my spine and I shivered. I knew I hadn't taken the bite. I dropped the sandwich, grabbed my cell phone and keys and went outside to lock myself in my car.

The cops practically laughed at me. One of them actually told me that even if he could press charges for Unlawfully Biting a Sandwich, I had no proof that anyone had been in the house. I'd probably just forgotten, blah, blah, blah. They couldn't do anything based on a bite and a feeling. They at least searched the house and waited while I locked all the windows. I was pissed but they were right; I had no proof.

After they left, I purchased a standalone web camera that streamed directly to my laptop. I didn't think I was imagining things anymore.

About a week later, as I pushed the front door open, I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck. As I stepped in, the greasy feeling reached out and enveloped me, hugging me tightly in

paranoia. I went into the studio and opened my laptop, clicking on the footage file. I began to fast forward through it. Suddenly, a movement shot past the frame. I slowed the footage to normal speed, backed it up and resumed playing.

I felt my skin flush and tighten as I watched the front door. The light attempted to push past the curtains, and the room looked peaceful as the silent footage slid past. Then there was a movement in the curtains, the light peeking through was blocked and the door pushed open. Brilliant yellow light flooded the kitchen, hugging a figure in dark shadows. It stepped in and as the door closed, the figure solidified into a slender, human form. It wore denims and a light grey hooded sweatshirt. The hood was pulled up, covering the face, but strands of fine spun gold hair poked from the top of the hood. It walked towards the camera and the shadows faded to expose the face of a young man.

I only got a quick look at his face. He looked so young, hardly old enough to own his own razor. He went straight to the fridge, and I watched in growing amazement as he opened the door and rummaged inside. He took out the milk, squeezed open the spout and chugged straight from the carton. He removed a Ziploc container and popped it open, scooping out cold spaghetti with his fingers, shoveling pasta into his mouth. He put the container back in the fridge when he was done and closed the door.

I was furious as I watched him go into my bedroom, but that was nothing compared to watching him in my studio. The camera could see just inside the doorway and I squirmed in impotent rage as he entered. I kept my paintings covered when I wasn't working. I can't really explain it but when people look at my work before it's finished, it feels tainted. It's like their eyes steal the vibrancy of the colors, smudge the lines and it breaks the bond between the canvas and me.

It sounds pretty stupid, I know. But I was practically hopping up and down with rage as I watched him uncover *Broken Heart*. He tossed the sheet to the floor and stood there for long minutes, just looking. Touching it with his eyes. I could see the colors bleeding into his consumption, fading from the canvas as the image solidified in his mind. As if that wasn't bad enough, the little fucker actually touched it! He stroked his fingertips over the paint, tracing the lines as if he were reading the stiff peaks and whorls of the dried paint.

I rewound the footage, slowing the frame rate, and zoomed the frame in to focus on his hand. His skin was pale, nearly translucent. I could see the bone structure running beneath the surface, twisted and wrapped with blue veins. His fingers were long and delicate, almost feminine in their grace. I wanted to run a razor across the back of his hand to part the skin, explore the structure beneath and paint the sapphire blue veins, the maroon muscles. Click by click I advanced the frame, studying the slow torturous strokes with which he defiled the moon on the canvas. For a time I forgot to be afraid or angry, mesmerized. I could feel his fingertips brushing my skin, transmitted by the conduit of the paint on the canvas, erotic and filthy.

I sat there for hours studying his hand before rousing myself to call the cops once again. This time, they didn't treat me as if I were nuts. But, beyond dusting the house for prints, there was nothing they could do.

I couldn't sleep that night. Every time I closed my eyes, the house would creak or a board would groan and I'd sit up in bed, convinced my visitor had returned to watch me sleep. I finally gave up and went into the studio to work.

I stripped the *Broken Heart* painting from the canvas with turpentine and an X-acto knife. It's a bitch of a process, as I had to be careful to scrape the paint away without damaging the canvas. By the time the sun rose, the smell of the turpentine was burning my nasal passages and

had leaked into to my brain, making me light headed and slightly nauseous. I placed the canvas back on the easel, and then turned it around to stare blankly at the wall. I quickly packed a small bag, as I knew it would be impossible to sleep in my bed.

It was late Friday afternoon by the time I worked up the nerve to return home from the nearby hotel. I dropped my bags inside the door and stood listening, drinking in the still air of the house. I locked the door behind me and left the bags where they were. I was drawn to the studio like a sleepwalker shuffling along the ley line of dreaming, my craving so intense as to push out thought.

I turned the canvas to face me and began by covering it in inky black paint. My hand moved automatically as I dabbed white on the canvas, sprinkling the salt of constellations in the blackness. Slowly, the silver moon emerged, shadowed craters pocking its surface. The right side of the moon erupted, spitting silvery shards into the night. I started to mix the reds, adding a touch of brown to bring the crimson to the surface. Over and over I mixed, until I had mixed and discarded a dozen different shades of red.

I was getting nowhere. I went to the kitchen for a Coke, flicking light switches as I went. The sun had gone down while I worked, and now that I'd gotten a fix, I was more conscious of the house. Nothing felt out of place but just knowing someone who didn't belong had been there made the dark corners uncomfortable. The feeling reminded me to check the camera footage.

It was stupid not to have done so first, but that gives you an idea of what I mean when I say I need. Until that minute, I'd actually forgotten about my visitor.

I scrolled through the footage for the next hour, finding nothing in the week I had been gone. I was just about to shut down the program and go attempt to wash the paint off when

movement scuttled across the camera view. I paused the footage and looked down in the corner of the frame. The time stamp was marked a few minutes before I had returned.

I backed it up and watched the hooded boy open the front door. He was rummaging in the fridge when he suddenly straightened and looked toward the door. He shoved whatever he'd been holding back in the fridge and slammed the door. I saw him look wildly all over the house but there aren't many places to hide in three rooms. He scooted into the bedroom and out of sight. Then I saw myself come in the door, drop bags and move like a zombie towards the studio. I scrolled faster towards the current time, but I did not see the boy sneak out.

My hands were shaking so badly I couldn't get control of the mouse, and the pointer slid crazily over the screen. I closed the laptop and sat there, mind racing. I'd left my phone in the kitchen. Maybe he had escaped through a window in the bedroom. There's no way he was still in the house. I listened, every inch of my body straining to hear a sound that didn't belong. All I could hear was the whoosh of blood in my eardrums as my heartbeat accelerated. My eyeballs felt as though they pulsed in their sockets in time to the beat. I was lightheaded and felt a sudden sense of weightlessness. I inhaled deeply, afraid I was going to pass out.

I looked to the front door, calculating the number of steps it would take to make it out the door. But why should I run? Because the boy could be a frikken psychopath, my panicked brain responded, but I discarded the idea. I stood up and for a moment, I wasn't sure my trembling muscles would support the weight of my body. With an effort I locked my knees but I couldn't make myself take that first step to break the winding sheet that fear was wrapping around me.

"Just a boy," I whispered, calling to mind the image of his youthful face. The thought was enough to get me moving, although my legs shook treacherously with every step I took. "Just a kid." I tried to tell myself there was nothing to be afraid of. The kid was probably drowning in

hormones and got some sort of sexual charge out of sneaking in and rifling through my underwear drawer. Or maybe his mother didn't feed him enough and he needed to supplement his meals with my leftovers.

I walked back into the kitchen, opened the fridge and rattled things around. I opened the crisper drawer and took out some lettuce and carrots, and dropped them on the counter. I made sounds as if I were preparing dinner, rattling plates. I slid open a drawer and removed a chef knife from within. I stood there for a moment, steeling myself, not sure if I could actually go through with it. I could hear a voice inside my head telling me to get the fuck out of there and call the police but my self didn't listen and padded quietly across the kitchen floor.

I'd been scared before. When I was seventeen, I'd gone hiking in the woods. It was early March and a false thaw had started. I'd hiked further than I should have, perhaps five miles in, when I'd come face to face with a black bear. My mother always said I kept my guardian angels busy, and they must have been working overtime that afternoon, mostly because the bear was still half asleep and willing to be distracted with a Ziploc container full of my mother's honey berry granola.

The bear had been the most terrifying thing I ever faced. The feeling now paled in comparison. Up until this point, he'd simply been 'the boy,' as if his slender, beautiful hands conferred youth and innocence. I slid along the wall and reached my hand around the doorjamb, flicking on the light switch in the bedroom. The room was tiny, with a queen bed and a bureau; there was barely enough room for a path to the closet door. There was so much stuff shoved beneath the bed that there wouldn't be room for an extra dust bunny, never mind a person.

The closet door was closed, darkness seeping out through the louvered slats. I held my breath, and listened for the sound of someone else breathing. When I heard nothing, I slid my body

around the jamb. It took me forever to cross the eight feet to the closet door, clutching the wooden handle of the knife so tightly that my hand ached.

I reached out with my left hand, intending to grab the knob but before I could, the door was pushed open from within. I swear to you, everything that came next was reaction. I never planned what I was going to do if he was still in the closet. How do you plan for something like that? I think I screamed or made some noise. I felt the weight of a body hit me and knock me back a few steps. I shoved back and then something like the Need took over.

Time slowed down like the controlled footage of a camera and I imagined someone clicking, frame by frame, through the images of the scene as it played out. Click. The boy flew backwards at the force of my shove, crashing back into the closet. Clothes were ripped from their hangers and covered him in cotton and rayon. Click. I followed the momentum from the shove and launched myself into the closet, raising the knife over my head. Click. My arm came down and the knife went in between his chest and his shoulder, the impact jolting my arm to the elbow. He cried out in pain. In the eternity that followed I had time to contemplate the unspooling film of my life. I was amazed at the resistance the flesh put up against the blade. It didn't slide in easily. Steel bounced off bone and tore through tendon, flesh and muscle pushing back against the intrusion. Click. I yanked the blade free, a hot spray of blood droplets spattering across my face. A drop landed in my right eye and half the world bled red and hot. Click. The next time my arm fell, the knife bounced off his breastbone, scoring his skin with the deflected blow, giving him time to draw in his legs and kick me in the stomach.

I flew backwards, landing hard on my ass, struggling to draw in air that wasn't there. Click. He was crawling out of the closet, coming toward me. The hood had fallen away and I saw the face of an angel. His skin was pale, stretched tight over the curves of his skull. He had high

cheekbones, and his eyes were slanted slightly. They were eyes made for deep, blue laughter, crinkled at the corners. His lips were the color of a blush rose petal, lush and full, parted slightly. He panted as he crawled toward me and I could see a wet, crimson stain soaking the shoulder of his grey hoodie. He was so achingly beautiful I wanted to paint him there on his hands and knees, face turned up slightly. He pushed himself upright and I managed to draw in a breath as he launched himself at me.

Click. It was instinct to put my hands up. I'd forgotten the knife in my hand. He lurched towards me, his delicate hands before him as he reached for me. This time, the knife slid easily into flesh, unencumbered by bone as the blade sank into his stomach. It went in so easily that my hand slid down the handle and across the blade, slicing deep into my fingers. His weight came down on me, and as he sagged I yanked the knife free. This time it was him who sat down hard, legs splayed in front of him, his hands clutching at his stomach.

I looked down at my hand as blood welled from a deep wound that sliced across my fingers and into my palm. My blood mingled with his, so hot it burned my skin, searing the nerve endings in agony. I dropped the knife and it fell to the floor with a muffled thump.

No matter what, I'm still human and the look on his face was agonizing. I wanted to take him in my arms, cradle and soothe away the pain for him. He raised his head and looked at me, eyes crinkled in the false laughter of deep pain. I dropped to my knees and crawled between his splayed legs, duped by the wounded animal look in his eyes. What the fuck had I done? Jesus, there was blood everywhere and I'd actually stabbed the guy. I was babbling some nonsense to him when I got close enough to grasp his wrists and pull his hands away from his stomach. I intended to help him, but I was close enough then to know I'd made a vital mistake. His hands

fell away easily but then his delicate fingers were pressed on either side of my neck. Their beauty was deceptive as his hands were strong as a steel vise, effectively cutting off my air.

I clawed at his hands and attempted to pry his fingers loose. I tried pushing myself back and away from him but for every move I made, he moved with me. Black pinpricks were dancing in the backs of my eyeballs, and my lungs burned with the need to inhale. I struck at him with my fists and he grunted with each impact but would not let go.

Click. The frame advanced and my hands fell away, dropping to my sides. He rose slightly, leaning forward to push me back, down to the floor. He moved with me, sliding up the length of my body until he was half laying in my lap. I felt the spreading warmth of his blood seeping into the fabric of my shirt and had the satisfaction of knowing I had wounded him badly. Even if he killed me, he'd wear my signature in an inerasable pink scar.

He leaned into me, brushing his lips across mine. He inhaled my scent but his hands cut off any breath I could have offered him. His lips were soft and warm as blood, his eyes so close to mine that I was drowned in the fuzzy blue ocean. I bucked once, my hands scrabbling against the carpet with the last of my strength but he merely pursed his lips and whispered "Shh."

My scrabbling hand brushed something cool and sticky. The knife. For a second, it wasn't worth the effort of the fight. It was easier to give in, give up. My muscles felt like liquid Valium, pliant and boneless. I was floating into the weightless blackness, unmoored from the scene, hovering at the edge of unconsciousness when my body was jolted and hot blood poured down onto my face. The iron band around my throat loosened, and I gasped, drawing breath through my swollen larynx. It felt like ground glass passed through with the air, and expelled razor bits as I exhaled.

Click. One last click and the world righted itself, sliding into real time once more. My vision, still pink and cloudy in one eye, cleared somewhat as I looked up at the man balanced above me. My hand still gripped the knife. The knife was embedded in the side of his neck and had opened up a wound that wept a bloody stream. Thick, crimson liquid dripped over his hands as he grasped his throat, trying to stem the flow that dripped down onto me. I stuck my tongue out to catch a blood drop, tasting copper and salt.

The ocean seethed in his eyes, raging against the tide as it flowed out, blue bleeding away. The light behind his eyes was fading, the crinkled smile lines disappearing. He rocked back and forth, emitting a low gurgling moan. I was mesmerized by the river of blood that was soaking in to me.

I shifted and he tipped sideways, crumpling into a fetal position on the floor. I scrambled backwards until I had the wall at my back and could go no further. I listened to the harsh wheeze and gurgle coming from him until it faded and then stopped. And still I sat and listened, convinced he was faking. And when I was no longer convinced, I sat because my body was frozen and refused to move.

My eyes were blurred, leaking tears. I was unable to raise my hand to brush away the moisture and instead watched the blood seeping out of the boy's neck. The blood spurts came slower and slower, finally slowing to a lazy ooze. I could see the individual fibers of the carpet, once a pale beige, soak up the dark blood, strand by thirsty strand. It was so red, so...

Red. And red. So fucking red.

The frozen death that tried to lock my muscles down was easing slightly, leaving in its place an earthquake that began somewhere in my gut. I felt it spread through my muscles,

trembling and shaking me until my teeth chattered. I tried to rise, push myself up the wall but I was shaking too badly to regain full muscle control. Finally I rocked forward on my hands and knees. In the far distance, I heard the sound of someone sobbing, but I had no thought but for the red.

I crawled forward, but it took an eternity to cover the few feet to the boy. I wished whoever was crying would shut the fuck up; the sound was pounding pain in my temples, leaking from my eyes. When I reached his side, I tipped sideways until I was sitting beside him. I reached my right hand down, my fingertips coming into contact with the blood-soaked carpet. It was sticky, warm on my freezing fingertips. I turned my hand over, looking at my red fingertips, studying the whorls and patterns of bloody fingerprints. His blood trickled slowly down the fingers of my upheld hand, seeping into the deep gashes in my fingers. It was the red of my dreams, the shade I had been unable to replicate. Paint can only imitate the colors of nature but here was the true palette I had been searching for.

With my clean hand I reached down to the boy, pushing at his shoulder. I turned him onto his back and his body settled with a dull thump on the carpet. His eyes were open, staring upward in pale supplication. I brushed away pale gold strands of hair that had caught in his lashes. My fingers continued traced the lines of his face, memorizing each ridge and curve. As in sleep, the lines and tensions in his skin had smoothed away, rendering him ageless.

Humans are always in motion; most of them can't bear the sound of their own silence. They're constantly twitching, twisting, flapping and squirming. If it's not their body in motion, it's their mouths. They've surrounded themselves in the noisy insulation of people and things that emit constant sound and movement. But there was a stillness to his body that was exquisite.

I gritted my teeth in an attempt to ignore the sound of the sobbing that threatened my concentration. That's what I mean, fucking people are never quiet.

The boy was absolutely, perfectly still. I slipped my hand beneath his sweatshirt, feeling the gentle heat where the fabric clung to the warmth starting to seep from his body. I felt the crink and crisp of the hair on his belly as my hand followed the trail upwards towards his chest. I lay my hand over his breastbone, but there was no rise and fall, none of the gentle vibration of heartbeat and blood flow. He was so perfectly beautiful in his stillness that I wished for a pencil and pad with which to sketch him.

But there was something I was forgetting, something picking at the recesses of my brain. As the animal brain that had engaged in battle slunk back to the depths, the sound of sobbing became louder. I thought that she was somewhere in the house and that I should go find her, but I didn't want to leave the boy alone.

I knew he belonged to someone. Even psychopaths have someone to love them and this beautiful boy must have been worshipped like a fine painting. I should have liked to have molded him with potters clay, shaped him into a statue to sit forever in the corner of my studio, but someone would want him back.

I drew my hand out from beneath his shirt, wiping it on my knee. I noticed then that my jeans were soggy at the knees, drenched in his redness. I rose then, my legs wobbling and threatening to dump me back on the floor. They held, and I staggered into the kitchen. As I was reaching for the cell phone, my eyes came to rest on *Broken Heart*, so naked with no red. I looked down at my bloody hand, still dripping. And then I looked back into my bedroom, where red leaked, seeped and soaked.

I left the phone where it was. I wiped at my wet cheeks, the sobs easing into occasional hiccupping sounds. I went in to the studio and grabbed one of the glass mason jars I kept on the tables, dumping the brushes it held all over the place. I took it into the bedroom and knelt down at the boy's side.

I knew what I was about to do was wrong in so many ways. It's funny, but I felt guiltier about desecrating his body than I did for taking his life. With my wounded hand, I scooped up a palm full of blood from the wound at his neck. I rubbed my fingers over the mouth of the jar, heedless that our blood was mixing together, lost in the scarlet smoothness, the blink of ruby light reflecting on the inside of the jar. There is absolute power in the color of blood. I imagine this is what religious fanatics feel like when the spirit moves them, a higher power that reaches into the soul and reworks the mechanisms by which we define ourselves as human.

Returning to the studio, I mixed the blood with red paint and added turpentine. The ritual of mixing and blending colors usually had a calming effect but the adrenaline still zipping through my blood made my hands shake badly. I nearly dropped the jar more than once. The jar jumped and trembled in my hand as I lifted it up to the light. It was finally fucking perfect! I would have picked up a brush then and there, but the animal brain was still active enough to give me some sense of self-preservation. It would be difficult to explain to the cops why I chose to paint with a body laid out in the other room.

I left the jar on the table, smack in the middle of the colorful chaos. Tubes and brushes covered the surface, littered in between jars, some containing paints, others brushes and turpentine. Hiding right in plain sight.

I called 911 then. It was only when the operator repeatedly asked me to calm down that I realized I was still sobbing brokenly. I think I was still crying when the police arrived. I couldn't

control it but it wasn't like any tears I had shed before. It was a mixture of grief – for the boy, and for the loss of the innocence of both of us – and exultation. I had walked away the victor, of the battle and soon, of the painting that had haunted my dreams and fears for as long as I could remember. I felt like some mad Joker, so wrapped up in the part that it fractured my mind into disassociated pieces.

The prick of a needle in my upper arm deflated the rainbow colored madness, submerging deep emotion under the creeping green vines of sedation. I remember thinking the dead boy had risen, and now wore the dark blues of an EMT uniform. I reached up to stroke his face, leaving bloody streaks on a cheek too rough with reddish stubble. The eyes were wrong too; not blue now but the faded green of thirsty grass. I told him he was wrong, but his eyes remained kind as he depressed the plunger and forced me beneath the surface.

There was a different set of eyes watching as I struggled up from the cobwebs of sleep. These eyes were hazel flecked with bits of gold, and shaped very much like the eyes I saw each time I looked in the mirror. I couldn't understand what my mother was doing in my bedroom or why her eyes were swollen and bruised with fatigue. She was sitting on the side of a bed that was too stiff and plastic to be mine, holding my uninjured hand in her lap. I moved and felt the scratch of too-stiff sheets on my bare legs. I realized then that I was in a hospital room.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said when she saw me focus on her. It was something she had said to me every morning for years. I was notoriously bitchy in the morning and couldn't stand anyone talking to me or even looking at me until I had at least a half a cup of coffee. She would greet me, I would growl at her and we would each go our morning ways. I tried to growl at her now and instead burst into tears.

She carefully stretched out on the bed beside me and gathered me, tubes, lines and all, into her arms. She laid a hand on the side of my head and pulled my head down onto her chest. She was a small woman, barely five feet on a good day. Disabling arthritis and age had shrunk her, and I had nearly a foot on her but I fit easily against her body. I willingly laid my head on her chest, terrible sounds coming from deep in my chest, wrenched into the light with my tears. She said nothing as she rocked me gently, just as she had through every illness and broken heart of my childhood.

I heard a quiet voice whisper to my mother and I would have pulled away but she held me tight as liquid sleep dripped into my veins. I tried to protest but my tongue was fuzzed with thirst and stuck to the roof of my mouth. And then I was back in my bedroom with the events of the evening playing round and round with my dreams.

The next time I woke, I heard voices and my name. I lay with my eyes closed listening to the conversation that was taking place in the corner of the room. I heard the low rumble of my dad's voice asking a question, and although I couldn't catch the words, I heard the doctor recommend that my parents sign me into the hospital for observation. As if the few hours he had spent on my case meant he had intimate knowledge of the inner workings of my brain. I wanted to sit up and scream at them all to get the hell out and let me go home.

I heard my mom refuse and I relaxed slightly. She was small but crafted from Maine granite. I could imagine her standing there, her silver hair glinting under the too-bright fluorescents, her hands on her hips as she frowned up at the doctor. My dad remained silent but I knew he was there, too. He could fade into the scenery, all but invisible. He usually had few words, but to me, observing him was like being in the deep woods. At first, there is a deep, almost oppressive silence. But really, there is a whole symphony of sound in the sighing of green in the

trees above, the rustle of brown things in the earth, the whisper of dusty grey wings through the air.

“We’re taking her home in the morning.” I heard him cross the room to the chair beside my bed. He’d said his piece. I slid my hand from beneath the sheet and reached out. I felt his hand wrap mine in tough, callused warmth. Where my mother’s touch was comfort, the grip of my father was strength, a shield I could stand behind whenever I needed to.

They didn’t release me from the hospital until late the next evening. I tried to act as if I were fine so the doctors would stop badgering my mother to convince me to stay. There was a constant tremble in my hands, and every so often the tremble passed from my hands throughout my entire body. I wrapped myself in layers of blankets, chilled so badly my teeth chattered. Every time I closed my eyes I saw the boy’s face, a death mask of porcelain frozen into memory. Doctors, nurses and parents all decided I suffered from the after effects of trauma, but it was more than that.

I love getting high, but I have never needed drugs. I never considered myself addict, and could go months or even years in between uses. I’d never done any of the harder drugs like heroin or crack, fearing the instant addiction addicts often described. I was addicted to the high of creating. Without pencils or brushes, without an outlet to let the colors out of my head or to channel the emotions that writhed in my gut, I hurt with need.

My fucking bones hurt, so badly did I need to get out of bed and go home. The inside of my skull felt scoured raw, my brain cells leaking bloody dreams within the damming confines of my head. My right hand, wounds stitched and bandaged, numb from Novocain, twitched incessantly in a futile attempt to wrap itself around a non-existent paint brush. Even my scalp

crawled with a maddening itch as the need oozed through my hair follicles. It was need that caused me to grind my teeth, want that fought sleep and efforts at further sedation.

Finally, I chased everyone out of the room, claiming a need to use the bathroom. When the room emptied, I clumsily removed the IV from my left hand. The right was still acting rebellious, a combination of the vestiges of the Novocain and throbbing pain. I clamped a tissue over the needle site without getting too much blood on the sheets. I managed to struggle into my jeans but I was standing there staring stupidly at the bra in my hand when my mother came into the room. Her lips thinned into a line, the skin around her mouth turning white. I didn't have the strength to deal with her too, and simply held the bra out to her and turned around, dropping the hospital johnnie to the floor.

I was thrust back into the body of my five year old self as my mother knelt there on the hospital floor, knees cracking as she crouched and slipped on my sneaker. Then, her hair had been a deep chestnut brown shot through with strands of brilliant red, and smelled of flowers and mother. I used to run my hands through it, fascinated with the changing colors and the way the waves sprang right back into place. Now, her hair glinted with a generous helping of pure white. Past and present overlapped in my brain as she carefully tied the laces. She grunted softly as she rose and I knew her hip pained her. My eyes welled with tears and as she bent to tie the second shoe, I ran my uninjured hand through her hair. She turned her head and pressed a kiss into the palm of my hand. She helped me into a shirt and coat, gathered both of our pocketbooks and we went to collect my dad from the waiting area. We sneaked past the nurses' station, and then we were free.

My mother had remained tightly controlled throughout the hospital visit. She was even good in the car ride home, limiting conversation and sound, respecting my need to wear my silence

for a while. But when she walked in the house and saw the shambles of the bedroom, the dark, rusty stain of the carpet, she burst into tears.

Even then, she didn't physically press on me her need to comfort. Instead, still weeping, she entered the bedroom, stepping very carefully around the stain. She reached into the closet, and took my suitcase down from the shelf. My dad looked at me and I knew it would be a united front. He was no better than I was at handling Mother Tears. I went into the studio and began packing up paints and brushes. I added the jar of red paint to my case. To my critical eye, the color appeared to have deepened slightly, taking on scarlet undertones. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to turn and close the door, shutting out the parents so I could finish *Broken Heart*. But looking at my bandaged, madly trembling right hand, I knew I could do it no justice.

I don't think the shakes eased completely until I was tucked securely into my childhood bed. I realize how ridiculous it sounds as you look at me now, but that was before.

I hadn't forgotten about Charlie. That was his name, Charlie Hanson. A 19-year-old student at Boston College, said the plastic blond on the evening news, a chemistry major with good grades. He warranted a few words, a home invader killed in a break-in. Money shot of a neighbor standing on her front porch, shaking her head regretfully as she parroted into the camera, "He was quiet and kept to himself. He always seemed nice to me." Ten seconds and Charlie died a second time, hacked into obscurity by stories more worthy of ratings.

When I slept that night, I had the old dream. I stood outside, my head tilted back as far as it would go as I stared blindly up at the moon. The vibration beneath my feet shot up into my legs, turning them to water as the fiery comet shot across the sky. And then I was lying on my back, watching the moon erupt. I felt a warm grip on my hand and turned my head. His face was only inches from mine, his eyes glinting silver reflection of the light that blanketed us. His breath was

hot on my skin and smelled of copper and turpentine. I'd never heard him speak aloud, but when he did, his voice was familiar and comfortable as old fleece. "Let go," he told me.

I don't know what the fuck he meant. Probably nothing. It was just some stupid dream. Some filament of my subconscious that felt guilty because I didn't feel guilty. That was the most fucked up part of it. I grieved for the waste of his life and even grieved for his mother. I saw the sad look in my mother's eyes as she watched me over the next weeks and could almost hear her reimagining that night. I could feel her grief over what might have been and it gave me some shadowy idea of what his mother must be going through. But I didn't feel guilty for having killed him. That's what I told myself, again and again, and I convinced myself that I believed it.

But there he was, in my dreams, his skin glowing with an iridescent silver light, captured moonbeams flooding his veins with a pulse like a heartbeat. Every night he lay with me in the wet grass, and we watched the moon bleed into the night sky. And each time she bled, Charlie faded just a little bit until I could look through him and see the landscape behind him.

It took about a month before I could use my hand again. The fresh scar pulled and tingled, new skin raw to the touch but the clumsiness had slowly faded. I finally convinced my parents to take a break from babysitting me for one evening and go out to dinner alone. One doesn't run to the corner market or local Dunkin' Donuts in Rockwood; the nearest town was nearly forty minutes away. As soon as I heard the crunch of tires pulling down the gravel drive, I returned to my bedroom to gather my paint box and canvas. I dragged everything up the stairs to the attic. As a kid, I'd been banished to the attic when my mother complained of the smells of oil paint and turpentine, but I think she just wanted to contain the mess of me somewhere out of sight. My mother, bless her, had dusted and tidied my old work area. I set the unfinished painting on the old easel.

I worked slowly and ritualistically, setting out brushes and glasses on the small table beside the frame. The old house talked quietly to itself, popping and creaking as it settled in to watch. I lay out the tubes of paint, and finally, opened the jar of red paint. I sniffed it cautiously, half-afraid it would smell like rotten meat but it had an oily, chemical scent that left the tang of metal on my tongue.

My hand felt stiff, the skin stretched far too tightly over my knuckles. The scars that cut across my fingers were still livid purple, new skin sore and untested. I flexed my hand, over and over. I think I was stalling. What would I do if the muscles and tendons had lost their memory of how to hold the brush? My hands still shook noticeably, in fits that came and went. The tremors would last minutes and hours, coming and going at will. What if my hands were never going to stop shaking?

I couldn't put it off for too long, as the paints would start to lose their consistency. I picked up the brush and dipped it in the red. I lifted it to the canvas and Charlie whispered in my ear, "Let go."

He guided my hand to the canvas, using it to slash red paint right to left across the canvas. We added a bit of brilliant yellow into a dab of red and stirred it just enough so that the colors intertwined but did not mix. He popped the handle of the brush between my teeth and took my thumb and dabbed it into the paint. My thumb traced an arc over the night sky and fire bled from my dreams and through the thumb pad. He took the brush once more and feathered the paint along the edges, drawing out tongues of flame along the length.

He dropped the light brush we had been using in favor of one with heavier bristles. As he loaded the brush up with the red paint I wanted to tell him it was too much, that it would drip down the canvas but the silence in the room was too heavy to break. He thrust the brush at the canvas

as if he would stab through it, rend it with bloody wounds. And the paint did drip from the slivered, meaty pieces of the broken moon, but it was right.

There was only a tiny bit of the paint left when the painting was nearly complete. Charlie was almost too weak to guide my hand now but I knew where the last bit of him belonged. I dropped the brush on to the table and tipped the jar upside down over my cupped hand. The light overhead shone into the glass, lighting the progress of the last gob of paint as it tracked slowly over ridge and rim of the jar before sliding out onto my fingers. Once more I saw the whorls and patterns of my fingerprints coated in Charlie's blood and for a few seconds, I was back in the bedroom waiting for him to turn from boy to porcelain statue.

I flicked my fingertips at the canvas and a fine, red mist of droplets stuck to the canvas. Again and again I rained red paint across the night sky, scarlet stars that contained the map of Charlie's death.

I've thought of Charlie often over the years, but I've never dreamed of him again. Nor did I ever have that nightmare again. But I never stopped dreaming in red. The need to find and recreate Charlie's red became a need greater than that for food or sex.

The problem was, killing another human being changes you. You can't take someone's life without breaking something integral. I could tell myself that it was self-defense, but it doesn't change what I've done. And I'm not talking about guilt, not really. I'm talking about a separation from the rest of humanity, a dissonance that disrupts the rhythms of daily life. I felt as if I were a half-second behind the flow of time that everyone else waded through. With the painting finished, there was an empty, gaping hole inside of me. A deep restlessness moved into the void, filling it with a nagging need to move, to do something.

I'd packed my bags and brooked my mother's protests when I told her I would be leaving the next day. I saw the change in her, too. It was in her eyes, the way she looked at me. There was a sadness in the way she looked at me, and I felt her grief. At first, I thought she grieved for what I had experienced, but as the days passed, I came to understand that she recognized the part of me that had died with Charlie, a wound she could never bandage for me.

I grabbed my fishing rod and escaped before she could talk me into staying any longer. I hiked miles through the back country, but the time slip weighed down my body until it was difficult to put one foot in front of the other, to raise my eyes from my feet to my surroundings. I found myself at Prong Pond, with no real memory of how I'd gotten there. I stopped, listening for the sound of boat motors or voices, but I had the place to myself. I dropped my stuff and took my rod down to the water's edge.

It was late fall, and one of those perfect days in Maine. It was cold at night already but once the chill burned away, the air was warm. The sky was brilliant blue with only a few strands of cotton clouds that were being picked apart by a warm breeze. The quiet of the place wrapped me up in a blanket of welcome, swaddling the itchy nervous feeling that buzzed under my skin.

By the time I'd caught a string of fish for dinner, I was feeling much calmer. I felt as if I might have slipped back into time with the rest of the world. The restlessness was quieted now, drowsing in the warm sunshine. I laid the fish out on the shore. I took a knife from my tackle box and set about dressing the fish. It was easier to clean them here than to listen to my mother grouse about fish scales stuck to her walls and cabinets.

I'd done this a thousand times before. I scaled the fish quickly, my hands automatically scraping away the tiny jeweled scales. When I was done, I flipped the fish over, holding the body in my left hand. With my right, I took the knife and slid it into the body, just below the head. The

tip of the knife met brief resistance from the tough skin and then broke through with a pop that was more felt than heard. A trickle of blood leaked from the puncture. I stopped, riveted by the sight.

My skin flushed hot, the touch of the sun almost unbearable now. It burnt, my whole body on fire. I swayed, my brain unmoored in my head. My hand moved automatically, drawing the knife slowly from throat to tail. I could see the flesh part slowly for my blade, bright red blood wetting the steel. I held the blade up before my eyes, turning the knife so that the sun caught the contours and curves of the blood drops on the steel. Everything else faded away as I studied the colors.

Fish blood is thin and watery, nothing like the sticky, viscous consistency of human blood. I rubbed my thumb pad over the flat of the blade, smearing the blood. I dropped the knife and slid my fingers into the body, scraping slimy goops of purple organs onto the sand. I leaned back on my heels, hands dripping gore as I contemplated the fish body. There was some vital element of color that was missing, was wrong, but the sight of the blood ripped away the calm I'd worked so hard to cultivate.

I think that was the moment when I knew. One painting would never be enough.

Bait

She cast her rod, the zip and hum of the line as it flew loud enough to disturb the nearby loon, causing it to change course and drift in a lazy circle in order to cast a wary eye her way. There was a soft plop as her bait hit the water. She settled into the bow of the boat, bracing her feet on the rim.

Wilson's Pond was their "secret" fishing spot. Deep in the woods, one either had to walk miles in or rely on a trusty Subaru to navigate the root infested path that masqueraded as a road. But a filthy car and an occasional mud bath after unsticking the trailer was a small price to pay for the quiet. In all the years they'd been fishing the pond, they'd occasionally come across a hiker but they were few and far between.

The only sound was the occasional slurp of a wavelet against the side of the boat. The pond was far enough off from the road that no city or auto sounds intruded. Random birdsong floated out from the trees that hugged the shore of the pond, but the reverential hush of the place muted the notes. She always felt as if she were stepping into another world, a place of quiet, natural worship.

There was an acidic viper that writhed angrily in her stomach, battling to force its way up and out, tickling her throat with the need to gag on the poison. Although outwardly calm, her inner turmoil remained unaffected by the peace that usually soothed her.

That morning, she had taken two Valiums from the medicine cabinet and brought them down to the kitchen as she worked to pack a cooler. As she dropped the pills into a pestle bowl, there was a half-formed idea in her mind, a convoluted mess of anger, thoughts of payback and

the ache in her heart. He was particularly susceptible to the effect of the drug and she could use it to pull the truth out of him.

Her knuckles whitened as she pressed down on the mortar, anger singing in the rhythmic scrape of the marble as she ground the pills into a fine, blue powder. There would be no going back if she did this. Her hands slowed as she considered exactly what “this” was. She usually planned her words before confrontation, attack and response carefully synchronized on a verbal chessboard in her mind. She knew, as did the snake in her belly, that there was something different between them, something off. Where there was once the easy friendship and affection of long years together, he’d suddenly pulled away. He worked extra hours, coming home only to sleep. Conversations between them had been curt, or none at all beyond the ‘later’ he’d toss off carelessly as he left the house.

It was his anger that finally caused her vague suspicions to coalesce into knowing. He wasn’t a man given to temper or easy anger. But when she attempted to reach him, to find out what was bothering him, the conversations devolved into shouting matches about mortgage and bills, or her housekeeping skills, everything but the answers she was looking for. They worked hard and used to play hard together, but the bills weren’t behind, everything paid on time.

She shook the contents of the marble bowl on to a paper plate. She just wanted to know why when he looked at her lately, it was with disdain. Why when he spoke to her, there was dislike in his tone. If he had stopped loving her, who was he loving? She fashioned the plate into a funnel and poured the powder into a bottle of Gatorade, twisted the cap on. It was the only way she could think to penetrate his defenses, perhaps get him to slip up. Her mind shied away from the consequences if he ever found out she had drugged him. But she’d been a good wife for a lot of years; would he even suspect?

She set her rod under the seat and leaned over to rummage in the cooler tucked into the bottom of the boat. She removed a bottled water and a fruit punch Gatorade from the ice, making enough racket in the cooler to wake her dozing husband. Instead of passing him the bottle, she shook the Gatorade vigorously, eyeing it to be sure the powder had dissipated in the cherry colored liquid before tossing it to him. He caught it and set the bottle on the seat beside him, and began to reel in his line.

As she looked at her husband, for first time in years she really saw him. After so many years of marriage, it was easy to look past him, oblivious to the creeping change of distance that grew between them. His size was what first attracted her; he was a big man, wide-shouldered and heavily muscled. His skin, which tanned when the sun even hinted it might touch him, was a light caramel color. She used to love to lick the side of his neck like he was a piece of candy, and her mouth watered at the memory of the salty, male taste of his skin. Did he ever look at her this way, did he ever really see her anymore? He used to tell her that one of the things he loved about her was that she didn't spend a fortune in time and money on clothing or makeup. He liked that she didn't feel the need to decorate her body in order to be beautiful.

She looked down at her hands, turning her water bottle over and over as she considered her words carefully. The crackle of plastic was overly loud, out of place.

"Do you love her?" she asked. The words slipped out, impulse working against planning and deliberation. She watched with interest as his skin stretched taut across his face, first burning with blush before the color drained away.

"What are you talking about?" He set his rod between his knees and reached for the sweating bottle of Gatorade. She watched him closely as he twisted the cap off and took a deep gulp, drawing it out in an effort to stall for time.

She swung her legs down, rocking the boat gently as she upset the balance. She took a piece of paper from the back pocket of her shorts and carefully smoothed out the wrinkles in the credit card statement before she set it on the seat between them.

“When did that come?”

“Last week.” Her skin prickled and burned, heated with the rage thrumming along her nerve endings. The bill had come on one of the rare days when she picked up the mail. Usually her husband got the mail and sorted through it by the time she got home from work. She couldn’t have said why she’d bothered to open the envelope. As she’d scanned the itemized statement, she was puzzled by the number of charges. There were two pages to the list, which was highly unusual. In the past, they’d only ever used credit cards for emergencies.

She’d unwillingly memorized the entries; they stuck in her mind after she’d read the list. There were charges for a hotel on the opposite side of the city, restaurants she hadn’t been to, tickets to a show she’d never seen, and bottles of wine she’d never tasted. She had thought of calling the company to report the card as stolen, but then the finer details had sunk in. She collated the dates on the bill with the calendar; the charges were almost always on a Monday, the one day she was away at work all day.

“Oh.” He had the grace to look ashamed but it was fleeting. “I’m not going to stop seeing her,” he said.

She nodded towards the Gatorade bottle. “Drink.” It was late August and the sun beat down on their heads with the heat and weight of wasted years. He made no comment but obeyed, draining half the bottle this time. His sharp profile was forbidding, and he was in the process of shutting down and shutting her out. She was familiar with his method of doing battle; he drew in

the bridge and set his defenses at the first sign of trouble, and she was left to lay siege. Over the years, she'd learned the chinks and weaknesses, but it was still near impossible to break through.

"What about me, your wife?"

"Look at you! When is the last time you wore makeup? And would it kill you," he said, flinging a hand in her direction, indicating her shorts and worn t-shirt, "to put some decent clothes on once in a while?"

"She dresses nicely for me. She wears makeup and cooks me dinner. She's never too tired, or too busy." His words flayed her skin, scratching at her raw nerve endings. He knew how to lay down cover fire from his position. "And she has kids."

Her mouth gaped open like one of their baitfish, and she instinctively cradled her abdomen. After three miscarriages, the doctors had told them that she would be unable to carry a child to term. The first two had been lost early enough that she could convince herself they weren't really babies yet, were nothing more than a collection of cells. But the last had grown large enough to swell her belly before her body had ejected the child. He had refused to try again, had sworn he could not watch her grieve again.

"I want a divorce," he said, looking away from her. "You're my best friend, but you're not my wife. Not anymore."

"Someone ought to teach you how to treat your friends," she answered. She took a breath, drawing the green scent of the pond deep into her lungs in an attempt to hang on to her rising temper. "Who is it?" Her eyes dropped to the bottle in his hands. There was an inch of cloudy red liquid remaining.

He made no response, and she growled low in her throat. She reached under the seat for her rod and began to reel in the line. Lifting the hook from the water, she inspected the half-eaten shiner before removing it and tossing the mangled carcass into the water.

The bucket of shiners hung over the stern of the boat, keeping the water aerated and their bait alive. In order to get another, she'd have to climb over him, but suddenly, the thought of touching him was sickening. She sat there, the hook dangling from the line between her fingers. Although they'd spent years fishing together, she had always hated baiting her line with the tiny fish. The pop of the hook as it pierced the back of the shiner made her slightly ill. He'd bait the hook but she made up for it. She had no problem removing the occasional catfish from the line, something he hated to do. He'd invariably end up bitten, while she could easily grip the fish, twist the silky, fat body from the hook and drop it into the water in one smooth motion.

Half an hour passed and still she sat motionless. Her thoughts moved restlessly, ceaselessly sifting through memories. "She has kids," she heard again in her mind. She might be able to forgive an affair. She had a rather fatalistic view of men. She honestly believed that men had spent so many centuries convincing themselves that they were powerless against feminine wiles that it had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was okay for males to fuck up, and fuck around. But the kid comment hadn't been a random shot; it was a missile designed to kill. She had wanted truth from him and the irony was, she'd gotten it without the need for any of her scheming.

Flipping her legs over the seat, she turned to face him. He was dozing again, leaning drunkenly against the side, unbalancing the weight distribution of the boat. His head lolled, nearly resting on his shoulder. In sleep, the lines of his face softened and the years fell away. Gingerly inching over to the next seat, she lowered herself into position directly across from him. She loved him in the comfortable way one loved an old, favorite blanket, but the love was faded, pilled with

mistakes and regret. She was suddenly horrified by what she had done to him, as if drugging him was going to solve their problems.

She reached forward and used her fingertips to smooth a hank of sweaty hair from his forehead. He turned his face into her touch, muttering a name. She recoiled, wiping her hand on her shorts. The name he had spoken was not hers.

She nudged his leg roughly with her foot. At first, the only response was a soft snore. The second kick was harder, perhaps harder than she'd intended because he sat upright, rocking the boat. He blinked, his eyes bleary and unfocused. She nudged him once more, jerking her head towards the aft.

"I need a new shiner." He scowled at her, but ponderously lifted his bulk from the seat. He wobbled, shaking his head as if to try and clear the fog, and the boat wobbled with him. When it looked as if he would fall into her lap, she reached up and shoved him upright. "What is wrong with you?" She feigned puzzlement.

"I don't feel good." He scrubbed a hand across his face and she heard the rasp of stubble against his palm. "Let's head in."

"There's still a full bucket of shiners left," she snapped. "Bait me and go back to sleep if you want, but I'm not ready to leave."

"Fine." He used the petulant tone he reserved for when he wanted to let her know that it really wasn't fine, but it was the only way he could respond to her unreasonable demands. He also knew it would piss her off and even though she knew it was calculated to get such a response, she could feel the muscles in her jaw lock down, grinding her teeth together.

He leaned over the aft, and grasped the rope to haul in the shiner bucket. As he fought the drag of the water, he leaned forward. She didn't think, just lifted her foot and planted her heel solidly against the base of his spine, trying to shove him forward. Despite his apparent wobbliness, he caught his balance with one hand on the rim of the boat.

"Oh, fuck this," she muttered as she pushed herself from the seat, planted her outstretched palms firmly against his back and shoved. The rocking of the boat, combined with the effects of the Valium, was too much for him to recover. He tipped forward as if in slow motion, too drugged to fall properly. She shoved again, putting the full weight of her body behind it. He cracked his hip on the side of the boat and when it looked as though he would right himself, she rocked sideways, tipping the balance. His knee cracked against the side with a crunch of bone meeting metal, but his momentum was too great and he fell into the water with an ungainly splash. She had the mad urge to laugh with the loon.

He surfaced with an inarticulate roar and she scrambled backwards as his hand grasped the edge of the boat. But twenty years of her cooking combined with a propensity for lumping on the couch in front of the TV fought against him as he attempted to haul his body into the boat.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," he spluttered, his face a deep, ugly red.

She might have left him there, and let him swim his lazy ass back to the shore as best he could. She'd started out the morning with only a half assed plan to make his life miserable, to get the truth out of him before he could erect his battlements. But there was real hatred in his tone, and it erased the momentary guilt she felt.

She reached to her left, unlocked one of the oars and pulled it into the boat. At first, she prodded him with the paddle blade, using it to push him away. But the more he cursed and threatened her, the angrier she became.

“You’d better...find someplace else to live...because you’re not living in *my* house!” His words were spaced out as he gasped for breath, fighting the water and the drug in his system. They had bought his childhood home and his insistence that it was “his” house had been a bone of contention since the first days of their marriage. It was a match struck deliberately to the fuse of her temper. Her eyes burned with tears, which only made her angrier. She poked him hard in the chest with the oar and he slipped beneath the surface of the pond. When he came up, he was coughing and spitting water.

He was pale, and there was a sickly, yellowish cast to his skin. She drew the oar back, a bit of sanity pulling at her, urging her to stop this. She had never intended it to get so far out of control.

He flung a hand over the side of the boat, holding his head above water as he choked on the words. “I’ll need plenty of room for the kids.”

“Fine.” She mimicked his petulant tone. What little pity she might have felt for him was gone. The pain rose up in her chest, bright and hot as the August sun and she wanted to hurt him as badly as she hurt. She rose from the seat, balancing precariously as the boat rocked. She raised the solid, wooden oar over her head.

“I dare you...” he challenged, but she didn’t wait for him to finish as she swung the oar down. He threw an arm up to deflect the blow and the blade glanced off his forearm. When he

drew back with a cry of pain, she dragged the oar back into the boat. As he continued to rock the boat with his uninjured arm, she nearly ended up in the water with him.

She raised the oar over her head once more, both hands clasping the handle so tightly she could feel the worn wood sinking little splinter bites into the palms of her hands. She kept her eyes locked with his as she put all of her strength into the downward swing.

The oar connected with his head with a solid thunk. The impact ran up her arms, reverberating from fingers to elbows. The shock sank into the depths of her gut with a wave of nausea. A gash opened on the side of his head, leaking thin, watery blood. The oar dropped from her nerveless fingers and slid over the side of the boat into the water with a faint splash.

He made a strangled sound, half curse and half garble that had no real meaning. His eyes rolled back in their sockets. The blood from the gash on his head leaked faster now, blood trickling down over one ear. His arm fell weakly from the side of the boat, and he slipped beneath the surface of the water. Her stomach convulsed painfully, forcing its contents up into her throat. She leaned over the side and puked, dark spots dancing in her vision.

She dropped heavily onto the metal seat and took great gulps of air into her lungs, fighting the urge to pass out. She could see the outline of him still, blurred and indistinct beneath the surface of the pond. She marked the bubbles that rose to the surface, coming slower now. Somewhere in her mind, she could see herself diving over the edge of the boat to pull him up but she remained a spectator, watching from a distance. The spectator screamed at her to move before it was too late, but shock had glued her in place.

She looked away from the epitaph of fading bubbles and instead watched as tiny ripples of water carried the oar away from her. The silence of Wilson's Pond fell once more.

Dream House

The sound of the radio snapped her awake, but she didn't immediately open her eyes. Huddled beneath the quilt, she enjoyed the last few minutes of warmth as her mind gradually focused on the voice of the newscaster. She heard the words "storm of historic proportions" and whipped a hand out and slammed it down on the top of the clock radio, turning the noise off. Like many New Englanders, she'd learned to ignore the dire predictions that masqueraded as local weather forecasts. Doom and gloom drove ratings far better than a few gusts of wind and some sideways rain. She'd been hearing it for days, a rare confluence of storms that would meet off the northeastern coast, but by now, it was the same recycled word hash served over and over. Still, she was faintly uneasy, a feeling that finally prodded her to get out of bed.

Adrian inched out from beneath the quilt, gradually exposing her body to the chilly air of the bedroom. She winced as her feet came into contact with the icy wood of the floorboards. She groaned as she stood, bones and joints cracking and snapping into place. The house whimpered in sympathy, the boards beneath her feet creaking grumpily with each step. In the space of the seconds it took her to cross the room, all of her hoarded sleep-warmth leached away and left her shivering beneath her flannel gown.

She threw open the heavy curtains of the bay window that dominated the eastern wall of her bedroom. The Atlantic stretched into the horizon, dotted here and there with the misty outline of tiny land masses in the distance. In the minutes before dawn, the sky was crowded with clouds of steely grey, glaring so ferociously at the world that the surface of the ocean was temporarily calmed into sickly green submission. She reached forward to turn the crank at the base of the middle window. The wind pushed in, caressing her face and playfully tugging at her hair causing her to shiver as the cold worked its way around the back of her neck. She inhaled deeply, the scent

leaving the taste of must and salt in the back of her throat. There was another fleeting flavor on the wind that some primitive part of her brain registered, the taste of ozone and impending storm.

Adrian closed the window and turned away, murmuring a soft prayer as she crossed the room. There was an ancient, battery powered television set sitting on top of her dresser and she switched it on. The picture snowed in a storm of aimless pixels, but she could hear a voice coming from inside the white noise. The local weatherman's voice sounded gleeful as he predicted the impending destruction.

She'd lived here long enough to weather the violence of a few monster storms, but nothing like the one coming in. A few days ago, the coast had been knocked around by a nor'easter. Normally, the storm would track out to sea but this time, as it had moved, it had collided with the low pressure system of a dissipated hurricane. As it looped back around, it would merge with a third storm coming down from Canada. She had just finished repairing the damage from Hurricane Bob, which had landed two months earlier, yet even now she never doubted her decision to buy this house. It had filled the emptiness, nail and board becoming spouse and lover, sanded and painted walls her children.

Kitty-cornered between dresser and closet was a large, standup mirror. It stood nearly seven feet tall, framed in sterling silver ropes that twisted like snakes the frame. She stepped sideways, clenching her teeth to fight the shivers that wracked her body, and began her daily inspection. She liked to take constant inventory of the things she owned. Every piece of furniture, tools or equipment she owned was kept in careful working order and her body was no different.

It was a tool well used. Unable to sand, polish or oil away the flaws, she was forced to witness the slow creep of time across her body. In her early forties, her body had started to dry out and droop in unexpected places. Her hands belonged to an old woman, no longer soft and

supple but calloused, cracked and raw in places. The skin around her knees sagged into a mass of loose wrinkles, racing to keep up with her aging hands. She had thick chestnut hair that fell to her waist, but lately she'd noticed rough silver corkscrews sprouting from her temples and crown at odd angles but as fast as she plucked away the evidence of aging, three new sproutlings would emerge.

She leaned forward, squinting in the gloomy light. As she did so, the corners of her eyes crinkled. Her mother always called the tiny wrinkles laugh lines, and once, Adrian had earned the lines. Now, she opened her eyes too wide to make them disappear. Her green eyes, brilliant as the Atlantic sparkling and dancing beneath full sun, tilted at the corners and slightly cat-like, were stark contradiction to the aging image. In her mind, she still felt no older than eighteen and the youth was reflected in her eyes. These morning inspections impressed upon her the shrinking time left in her race to make a mark upon her world as deep and as humbling as that which nature affected on her flesh.

Shivering in earnest now, she finished her morning inspection and dressed quickly, hiding the damage. The offending knees were easily disguised in the jeans she slid into. She whipped a brush quickly through her hair, binding it in a plait and smothering the silver corkscrews under a bright head scarf. She yanked a heavy sweater over her head, grabbed a pair of heavy socks and left the bedroom.

As she padded down the hallway and descended the stairs to the main level, the risers creaked a merry greeting. Although she had carefully worked to restore the house, she had purposely neglected the squeaky floorboards. She enjoyed the conversation of the house. Sometimes it was the only voice, besides her own, that she heard for days.

Adrian moved automatically through her morning routine, filling the kitchen with the rich, smoky scent of coffee. As she poured a mug, she lent half an ear to the clang and clamor of the pipes as the old radiators battle to heat the chilly air. She was just taking her first sip when she heard a pounding at the back door, signaling the arrival of the help she had hired. She glanced at the clock on the stove. 7:59 a.m.

She hauled her body up the ladder, a hammer clunking heavily against her thigh. She reached the second story and locked her knees against the cold metal. The curtains were drawn back and she could see into the yellow room. The sullen light of the day pushed its way through the window pane, where it bounced on walls the color of a ripe corn kernel. The wind pulled angrily at her clothing and her skin felt scoured and raw but inside the room looked peaceful, everything in its place.

It was the first room she had tackled when she'd moved in. The house had been a mess; the hardwood looked as though it had never seen a broom, let alone a sander and a coat of poly. The windows were filthy, crusted with so much salt and dirt that the house remained perpetually gloomy, no matter how brightly the sun shone outside. There were cracks in the plaster of the walls and ceilings, and she'd bathed with a bucket and pitcher for the first few weeks, as there was no tub or shower stall in the bathroom. The porcelain sink was cracked and leaked. The laundry list of repairs had been endless but until she'd completed the yellow room, she lived in the mess.

In the corner of the room was a wooden rocking chair. It had once been white but age had yellowed the paint and caused the gold trim to flake and peel. The paint on the arms had been rubbed away by generations of arms and hands, and it showed rich, brown wood. The chair had come from Ireland with her great Aunt Mary. In Adrian's family, aunt was a term of respect for

any elder relative; Adrian unsure of the precise relation, but she never forgot the odd little woman. A tiny, bent figure fluffed and frothed in pearls and a frosted pastry hat, her face was long lost in Adrian's memory but she could still smell the scent of her powder, and feel the dry pat of a gloved hand on her cheek.

"For your daughter," Aunt Mary had told her while she was still far too young to imagine a daughter of her own or the history that had scratched and rubbed the finish from the old rocking chair. It was one of the few things in the house that Adrian had not refinished or improved and it looked much the same as it had when it was given to her thirty years earlier. Once, it had held her secure as she rocked her daughter, whispering thoughts and dreams of the future, much as Adrian's mother had once done. Adrian didn't use the chair anymore, couldn't bear to sit in it with empty arms and a weightless lap, but she couldn't get rid of it.

There was a small dress on the chair, a brilliant yellow confection of tulle and lace, trimmed in shining satin ribbons that would have made Aunt Mary proud. It was carefully propped against the chair as if the child it once clothed had simply vanished in mid-rock, leaving the dress neatly behind. There was a fuzzy red Elmo toy seated on the hem of the dress, silent and giggleless. In the middle of the room was a twin bed covered with a thick, hand-stitched quilt. It was carefully smoothed, the pillow neatly covered and tucked, corners perfectly pleated. At the end of the bed stood an old sea chest neatly hiding away toys with no purpose. The stillness of the room was unnatural, as if the four walls contained a capsule where time was suspended in the act of drawing breath.

Her view into the room was cut off abruptly as a piece of plywood slid up and she grabbed it instinctively, pressing it against the wall. She gave her helper, the teenaged son of the agent that

had helped her purchase this place, an absent smile. She worked automatically now, her mind occupied with the stillness of yellow memories.

One day it had been too much to deal with the way people looked at her now, as if they recognized that she was no longer a whole person. The world went on and she was expected to go on with it. She was expected to return to her job and her everyday responsibilities, to function like a “normal” human being but she no longer knew or cared what normal meant.

It was a Wednesday when she had opened her mail to find a check from the insurance company. Somewhere deep in the back of her mind, buried under the massive weight of grief, had been the knowledge that the money would be coming but she was unprepared for the financial value that was calculated to replace a life. She sat at her kitchen table for hours, staring at the string of zeros on the amount line. It was an impressive pile, one that implied a complete freedom from the life she lived now. There was no joy in it but it gave her the ability to try and outrun the emptiness the money was intended to fill.

On Thursday, she deposited the check. When she had returned home from the bank, she packed a tent and a few changes of clothes, locked up the building that was no longer home, and drove north. She'd left an e-mail for her mother, but hadn't bothered to quit her job or inform any of her friends. Her nerves were scraped raw and she felt incapable of dealing with people.

She had spent a year aimlessly wandering the beaches in Maine. With the squish of sand between her cold numbed toes, and the tempting pull of salt water around her ankles, she could sometimes cease to think beyond bodily sensation and the need to walk. Even in mid-August, the water was icy cold. When her feet and ankles ached with deep cold, for a little while she could

forget the life she had fled in Boston. She carried supplies so she could pick a spot and camp when she tired of wandering. When she needed shower and a bed, she would find a small, out of the way motel and spend a night or two. Every few weeks she would drive down to Boston, pick up her mail, do a few loads of laundry and then flee before anyone could discover she was home. The solitude suited her.

The coastline in Maine where she wandered was a wild stretch of land. There were places that had been developed to trap tourists into spending money, but as one traveled further north, there was a clear demarcation between development and ancient land that remained much as it always had. The ocean met the hard, rocky barriers of the Maine coastline and ran for hundreds of solitary miles. Walking here often meant climbing through rock piles scattered like the discarded toys of Neptune.

One afternoon she'd walked so far that when she finally dragged her attention back to the present, she had no idea how far she had come. Adrian looked ahead, squinting against the glare of the heat mirage boiling up from the sand. She eyed the line of rocks and trees, looking for a clear way to climb back up to the road. A natural beach break soared over her head, rocks and tangled roots tumbling down the slope. Further down the beach, she could make out the outline of a structure backed up against the cliff face. She started toward it with the idea that there would likely be a path through.

As she came closer to the house, her temples began to throb. She knew this place, although she'd never been here before. She felt a click in her heart, an adjustment as if she had finally caught up with the world she'd walked three steps behind for months.

There was nothing particularly attractive about the structure; in fact, it rather resembled one of the tenement houses in Brockton, the dirty, crowded city where she'd grown up. It was a

boxy building, covered in wooden shingles that had once been deep brown, but were now grizzled with white streaks of salt. The house stood nearly as tall as a three decker, and looked as though it had been birthed from the sheer rock face that embraced the back of the house.

The most striking detail of the house was the windows. The front of the house was nearly all glass, providing what she imagined what an unimpeded view of the ocean from within the house. As she approached, she could see into the living areas, lit by what little sunshine pushed through the salty grime coating the glass. Walking around the perimeter of the house, she had to admire the absolute arrogance of a builder who dared to place such a building so close to the ocean. She estimated the distance didn't quite equal three football fields. The house was one giant middle finger to Mother Nature.

Beneath the house, there was no basement. The structure was raised on stilts sunk into the sand, and in her mind's eye, she could imagine the house sinking, millimeter by millimeter. It might take decades as the coastline changed, but She would win eventually.

As beautifully hideous as the house was, there was an air of neglect to it. Adrian rubbed the sleeve of her sweatshirt over one of the windows, cleaning a spot to allow her to peer inside. The rooms were furnished as far as she could see but it was missing the spark of life that a human presence brings to a wooden box. She found a stone stepping path that led up to the road but as she climbed, her limbs grew heavier and heavier, and she was panting and exhausted by the time she reached the top. It felt as if the house had physically attached itself to her and it was a struggle to pull away. As she walked slowly back to her truck, for the first time in a long time her mind was occupied with something besides the jagged, bloody hole that had been ripped in her life.

She told herself she had no energy for dreaming, but her subconscious disagreed and tormented her with dreams of the house. She often paced the empty rooms of her house in an

effort to outrun sleep, but the memories in the rooms haunted her far worse than the dreams. It was during one such endless night that she began to separate and box her belongings. When she was done, her boxes fit neatly in the back of her pickup truck. The rest she planned to arrange a pickup by Goodwill. It was close to sunrise when she locked the door for the final time.

She drove the eight hundred miles north with no clear plan in mind, but seven hours later she was pulling off to the side of the road near what she had come to think of as The House. Upon finding it as deserted as she'd left it, she drove into town. She'd checked into a motel and Googled the nearest real estate agent. It took the better part of the afternoon but by the time she settled into a booth at the local diner for dinner, she had made an offer to the owners of the house. When they rejected her offer, she doubled it. Money could buy anything, even from people as intractable as the boulders that grew from Maine soil. She checked out of the hotel a week later, keys to her new home in hand and a reputation as eccentric firmly settled in the currents of gossip of the small town where she was now an official resident. She had handed over a blood stained check that would keep the couple comfortable for the rest of their lives, and wished them a joy in it that she'd never be able to find.

The solitude of her new home suited her, and she hoarded it jealously. With technology and Home Depot delivery, she rarely, if ever, had the need to leave the house. Between YouTube, a growing set of tools, and the confidence to match, she had learned to restore and repair the house on her own. Her blood had been invested in the purchase, so it was only fair that her blood went into the care of the house.

The hammer she was swinging glanced off the head of the nail and slammed into her thumb. The fingernail split and she cried out in pain, popping the throbbing finger into her mouth. It tasted

faintly of nickel and copper. Her shoulders ached and her hands were shaking with fatigue, but they were hanging the last sheet of plywood and she wasn't willing to take the time to nurse the latest wound. Besides, if she stopped now, her muscles would tighten and contract, each joint locking into an ache that would make it difficult to finish.

The sky had darkened while they worked and now hung so low that she imagined she could reach up and grab a handful of dirty cotton cloud. It was early afternoon but the light had dimmed to a near twilight state and the wind threatened to rip the plywood away before all the nails could be set. A glance over her shoulder showed the ocean foaming with fury as it writhed and tossed insults back at the low hung clouds. Her skin was scoured raw, burnt by the whipping sand and wind and her jeans felt crusty and stiff. The first fat drops of rain fell as they packed up the tools and wood scraps.

She stepped just inside the back door, sand skittering on the floorboards of the mudroom as it fell from her hair and clothing. She stripped where she stood. As she padded naked into the kitchen to prepare a cup of sludgy leftover coffee, she could feel the sand falling from her skin, leaving a path behind her. The thought of a gritty floor would normally drive her to distraction, but she was exhausted from the labor and fighting the wind. She was also distracted by the sense of claustrophobia that had invaded the house once the windows were boarded up. The sound of the ocean seemed to come from too far away, muffled like cotton in her ears.

She started to question her decision to board up. The impending damage may have cost her a small fortune in repairs, but at least she would have been able to keep an eye on her most untrustworthy constant companion as it stirred and tested the boundaries of beach and land. She would have little warning if the ocean swam forward to claim her contested patch of beach. She tried to convince herself that she was being foolish. The house had stood for the last 70 years,

through hurricane, nor'easter, blizzard and thunderstorm. But as much as she had tried to ignore the weather forecasters and the hype, she felt increasing dread as the wind intensified outside.

The house kept her company, gossiping to her in pops and creaks as she swept the sand to the back door. The wind nearly tore the knob from her hand as she opened the door to sweep the sand out. It pushed in without invitation and she shivered violently. Already tender, her skin burned at the touch and she retreated hastily, locking the door.

She left radio and television off. The walls mumbled their own weather report in response to the howling wind, likely more accurate than the man on TV who could only offer a best guess. The volume of the house's complaints rose in correlation to the rising wind, until it became nearly impossible to distinguish the difference between the two. She offered no response, as it seemed unnecessary.

She showered quickly and donned a pair of sweatpants and an old sweatshirt. She plaited her hair into two braids that hung thick and damp on her shoulders. She gathered the pile of quilts from her bed and made her way back downstairs, planning to nest on the couch for the night. Chances of losing power were high, and the fireplace would keep her company through the long, dark hours of the night.

The living room also faced east and she'd spent many hours sprawled on the plush maroon couch that took up a good deal of the room, basking in the light and gazing out the window at the ocean. The room dropped from the rest of the house, descending two stairs to a sub-floor inlaid in clay tiles. A large fireplace to her left separated the living room from the dining area slightly above. She flicked a set of switches on the wall, one for light and one that caused the clay tiles beneath her chilled feet to warm. She checked her woodpile for the dozenth time but there was still enough there to last for at least two days.

She dropped the quilt pile on the couch and busied herself building a fire. The shadows hugged the edges of the room, pushed into the far corners by the roaring fire she stoked into life. Soon, the crackle and snap of dry wood accompanied the rising complaints of the house.

She dropped onto the couch, and drew the quilt up over her body. There was a nagging empty feeling in her stomach that reminded her that she hadn't eaten since the piece of toast she'd had for breakfast. She also had a stack of bills to pay, along with the other endless tasks she'd find so that she could forget for a while that she had only the house for company. She was only going to stretch out for a minute. She just needed to close her eyes.

Outside, the wind raged so hard the trees bent, writhing in protest as the last of the autumn foliage was torn from their grasp. The rain came sideways, currents of water driven by the wind until it flowed vertically, soaking and scouring the air. The ocean, unwilling to be left out of the game, thrashed against the beach. Like a child trying to attempt a difficult leap, the ocean would draw back and make a running start, leaping for its goal. With each failure, it would draw back a little further, each wave gaining momentum until inch by inch, foot by curling foot, the water broke its boundaries and surged forward.

The waves chewed at the beach greedily, until the water reached the demarcation where sand and soil begin to mix and the earth becomes denser. Water consumed the boundary that man imagined marked property and ownership, eating the hostas and lilacs planted around the borders of the scrubby lawn. It reached for the ankles of her house, licking and tasting the poles that braced the house's foundation. Finding the taste to its liking, the ocean took another running leap and surged forward to consume the poles with foamy greed.

She awoke to the sound of a loud crash, sitting upright, blinking to clear the black of sleep from her vision. She blinked again when it didn't work, her foggy mind struggling to make sense of the world. It took a long moment for her to realize that she wasn't blind; the power must have gone out. She could smell the smoky flavor of doused wood but could not make sense of the jumbled pieces of what her sleepy brain was trying to process.

She swung her feet over the edge of the couch and her heart skipped a beat when they came in to contact with the floor. She jerked back in surprise as her toes dipped into an icy puddle. The heavy sleep cleared from her brain and she lurched up from the couch, feet splashing in the water as she edged her way towards the fireplace. She felt along the mantle for the lantern and matches. Her hands shook badly as she slid open the box of matches, trying to grasp one of the tiny sticks. She fumbled the box, spilling matches. She finally managed to strike one and lit the wick.

There was a stream of water running down the chimney bricks, trailing soot and water and it spilled over the hearth and joined the current flowing around her feet. It was a mess but it didn't explain the volume of water that now covered the tops of her feet. She lifted the lantern high to survey the room. She cocked her head, listening for the voice of her house. She could barely hear her old friend's complaints, drowned beneath the sound the furious wind demons that were attacking the structure outside, clawing and tearing at the flimsy board and nails that barricaded the house.

The lantern swayed drunkenly in her hand and she adjusted her balance. With a sick punch of fear to her belly, she imagined the entire structure of the house was swaying. The light of the lantern pushed back at the shadows in the room and fireflies of light danced over the surface of the water covering the floor, making her slightly dizzy.

“Optical illusion.” The sound of her voice, hoarse and cracked from sleep, startled her badly and she jumped. Adrian laughed aloud then, the first genuine amusement she’d experienced in a very long time. She laughed so hard that she shook, great belly laughs that challenged the sound of wind, and mocked the storm and herself in equal measure.

She was still hiccupping with giggles as she edged her way cautiously towards the stairs. She could no longer feel her feet and had to cautiously slide each foot forward to keep from stumbling. The giggles abruptly disappeared when she reached the stairs to find a steady stream of water creating a mini-waterfall in her living room. She licked her lips but fear had dried the saliva in her mouth.

She climbed the stairs and forded the stream that led backwards to the kitchen. She kept hurricane lanterns in each room of the house. After a few knocked shins and a near concussion caused by stumbling around a lightless house, she had learned to prepare. She lit a second lantern and placed it on the kitchen island. Once again the house shook violently and she rocked back onto her heels. She heard the clink and rattle of dishes in the cupboards, and the pots that hung from the ceiling set up a coppery clank for attention.

She had to look outside. Once again she cursed herself for not leaving any window to the outside. She had no way of knowing what was happening. Taking up one of the lanterns she made her way to the back door. As she got closer, it sounded as though the ocean were lapping at the door. Adrian’s hand was steady as she reached for the doorknob, twisting the cold metal to release the latch. Before she could pull it open, the door was shoved with tremendous force. She stumbled, banging her shoulder into the wall with enough force that her arm went numb for a few seconds. The lantern swung crazily in her grip but she managed to keep a hold on the handle. The light failed to penetrate the depths of the darkness outside.

She screamed aloud as lightning danced sideways through the clouds but the wind stole her voice and danced away with it. Blue light burned her retinas and as she backed away, she could still see shadows dancing in her vision. The ocean had made a successful bid for freedom. The shore was gone, buried beneath seething water that now rose high enough to cover the stairs leading up to her back door. The lightning flashed once more and she estimated a good four feet of water now surrounded the island of her home.

A wavelet pushed forward, tugging at her ankles in an invitation to come and play. She grasped the door jamb and stuck her head out once more, calculating the chances of reaching the stone steps that led up the cliff side. But there was a living, hungry ocean waiting for a mistake, waiting for a taste.

She got behind the door and shouldered against it to close it, but not before another wave swept over the threshold, splashing into her. She stumbled through the house collecting towels and blankets and piled them against the entry doors but even as she worked, she knew it was useless. If the water rose any higher, it would be impossible to keep it out. With the fury of the storm still escalating, it could only get worse.

The floor rolled and bucked beneath her feet. Hit by a wave of nausea, Adrian barely made it to the kitchen sink before she was gagging, her empty stomach cramping at it forced acid up into her esophagus. A sickly cold sweat began seeping from her pores, and she could smell the taint of fear. Adrian rinsed her mouth with cold water and rummaged beneath the kitchen sink until she found a box of trash bags. She tore out a handful and splashed through water now nearly ankle deep as she fled to the stairs leading to the second landing. She stopped at the first doorway, pausing for a moment with her hand on the knob. Up here, the sway of the building felt more pronounced. The roof over her head moaned, the wooden structure begging the wind for mercy.

When she opened the door, lantern light pushed into the cheerful yellow room ahead of her, dancing playfully along the walls. She thought she heard faint laughter as the light danced and jumped from the walls to the bed. She walked to the window, forgetting for a moment the plywood that blocked the view. She could see only the dark brown wood and rivulets of water running down the outside of the window. She touched her fingertips to the cool pane of glass, leaving five round foggy prints on the pane. There was a bit of dampness along the window frame, but it was no surprise in a house this old. Otherwise, the seal was holding.

She turned from the window, shaking open one of the bags. She scooped up the yellow dress from the rocker and attempted to fold it neatly but her hands were shaking too badly, the howl of the wind urging her to hurry. She shoved the dress in the bag. Moving quickly now, she plucked the fuzzy red plush toy and stuffed that into the bag too.

She looked wildly around the room, unable to choose what to save. On the small bed was the quilt hand stitched by her mother. Most mothers kept a picture scrapbook; Adrian's mother had hand stitched the story of her daughter's life into the quilt. There was a square of faded blue, repurposed from Adrian's swaddle cloth; a white silken square cut from her baptismal gown; a faded bit of pink flannel from her first blankie; and so on, each bit of fabric memory chronicling Adrian's life. Adrian stooped and lifted the lower right corner of the quilt, running her thumb over a bit of bright yellow fleece. This bit Adrian had added, as tradition passed the quilt from mother to mother. She remembered her needle clumsily piercing the yellow fabric as she prepared to add a new story to growing quilt. The last piece she had added, stitched to the yellow fleece, was a piece of blue woven cotton. There was deep, rusty brown splotch that had penetrated the fibers and as she rubbed the material gently it felt stiff beneath the pad of her thumb. But like the books

that lay dusty and untouched on the shelves over the bed, there was no one left to read or carry on the stories. Adrian let the quilt fall back to the bed and turned her back on it.

There was a new sound that began to penetrate and dispel the ghosts of memories that crowded the room. It was a deep, rending moan that came with the tearing of sturdy wooden flesh. There was a second, softer keening that crept into her ears and worked its way under her scalp, itching and tingling. The hairs along her arms stood straight up, and she fought the cry that rose up to press against her gritted teeth. Moving quickly now, she closed the door behind her as she left the room. She hastily knotted the trash bag and dropped it on the landing.

She descended the stairs halfway, holding the lantern aloft. The water was definitely rising faster now and had made its way to first stair below her, but what held her attention were the windows at the front of the house. There were flashes of lightning clearly visible as the plywood began to buckle and pull away from the windows.

With a final cry of protest, the plywood gave way and flew off into the darkness. The pitched whine grew louder, and when the next flash of blue light lit the room, Adrian's cry echoed that of the house. On the other side of the glass, the ocean pounded its fists furiously against the bay window. The ocean had risen, trapping Adrian inside a wooden fishbowl. The whining sound was coming from the glass as it began to curve inward from the pressure. The glass had been constructed to withstand hurricane force winds but it protested the effort of damming up the entire ocean.

Adrian had never imagined that Hell would be so green and sandy and wet. She watched as the frame around the window bowed, letting in the first trickles of water around the molding. She clutched the bannister tightly to keep from falling, suddenly so cold and tired that her bone marrow throbbed with ground glass. With a final wail, the window frame pulled away from the

wall, chips of plaster raining into the rising flood. There was a loud snap and the windows burst inward. The water followed so quickly that the glass had no time to tinkle and fall, swept forward in the surge. The wind whipped into the house, stirring a frenzy of water that worked busily to erase all the bits and pieces of her life scattered around the room.

There was an ache deep in her bones, and the day's efforts had caused her muscles to cramp and knot. She felt like a very old woman as she pushed away from the bannister, rubbing a hand over her cheeks. The last of her tears dripped to the floor and was absorbed by the thirsty, aged wood. She walked down the hall to her bedroom and pushed open the heavy, oak door.

The door hinges creaked with all the graceful, gothic beauty of a haunted house. She loved the spooky sound, another of the many unique personalities of the house that had been her company for so long. She stroked her fingertips over the whorls and spirals carved into the wood, each nook carefully sanded with her hands. The door still hung just a hair off center, but she still felt a little swell of pride. When the yellow room had been completed, she had moved on to creating a space of her own.

It was during one of her trips to the dump that she'd discovered the old teak door. It didn't look like much at first and it was easy to see why the former owner had missed its value. The door had been filthy, mostly buried beneath a pile of scraps and she might have passed it by as garbage but for the brass rivets that were set into the wood. She had cleared away the trash and just that small bit of attention had exposed a rich patina of red and green hues in the wood. It was easy to imagine the door once guarded the library of a rich aristocrat or ancient cleric. It was completely out of place and time and as soon as she'd seen it, she knew it was destined to be her bedroom door. It had taken her nearly a week to clean, sand and hang the door. She had never been as proud as the first time she closed the door and it settled into its frame with a click of contentment.

She left it open as she entered the bedroom. Moving to the dresser, she yanked open the top drawer. She pawed through the clothing, tossing shirts carelessly to the floor as she reached into the back of the drawer to retrieve a black velvet ring case. She flipped open the case, removing a plain gold band. She slid the cold metal band on to her left hand, her mind splitting into two as she remembered the first time the ring had been placed there. His hand had been warm and slightly rough, large enough to engulf hers as he slid the ring on her finger. There was joy beneath the bleeding wound of her memories, and the ghost of a smile played on her chilled lips.

Adrian rummaged in the drawer once more and dragged out an old BC sweatshirt. The hem and cuffs were ragged and looked as though they had been chewed, and there were old paint splatters on the fabric. She held the sweatshirt up to her face and inhaled deeply, but all she could smell was the faint perfume of laundry detergent. Whatever essence of male scent the sweatshirt had once held was long gone, but the habit remained. She stuffed it into the bag as well.

She took one last, long look around the bedroom before retreating back the way she had come. The hallway bucked and twisted beneath her feet and she stumbled, arms flailing as she fought for balance. Her legs felt soggy and leaden and it was an effort to drag one foot in front of the other.

She had just reached the bag she'd left at the top of the stairs when a new sound caught her attention. She froze, holding her breath but all she could hear was the rush of wind as it pushed the water up the stairs. She picked up the bag and prepared to descend into the water below, some half crazed thought of swimming out in her mind, when she heard the voice again, a childlike wail of entreaty. The roar of the wind smothered it too quickly but instinct recognized it, and she almost turned back to the yellow room.

She shook her head to clear it. The house was playing tricks on her.

“Mommy!” The wind retreated for a heartbeat of time and this time she heard it clearly. It was a voice she heard every night in her dreams. She recognized it as if it were her own voice and it pulled at her.

Adrian clutched the trash bag with its precious burden and descended the stairs carefully, until she stood just above the level of the rising water.

“Baby?” The weakness in her voice was drowned by the fresh fury of the returning wind. She had left her lantern in the bedroom and although her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she could only distinguish shades of grey and black.

“Mommy!” This time the voice spoke against her ear. Adrian screamed and flinched away. Knocked off balance by her fear and the rising water, she stumbled and tripped. For a second, an eternal space of time, she was falling. Her skin tightened in preparation for the expected icy shock and there was time to draw in half a breath of air before the water reached up to cushion her fall.

Cold drove the breath from her lungs and a deep, fathomless greenness filled her vision. She struggled to right herself, breaking the surface of the water. She gagged as she swallowed salt water, her arms flailing for purchase as the water eddied and flowed, yanking her body where it would. She was dragged inexorably towards the yawning mouth of the window and the giant whale that was waiting to swallow her whole.

She flung her arms out, her fingers scrabbling for purchase along the walls. She caught at a door jamb, curling her fingers around the wood and pulling. She dragged her body forward, fighting the current, but that only made the water angrier. It tugged her viciously, and she felt fingernails tear away from the nail bed as she was dragged backwards. The searing pain in her fingers made her let go and slide into the current. She made one final attempt to catch herself as

she was pulled through the window, reaching out to grab the jagged frame. Jagged wooden splinters sunk into her soggy flesh, ripping open her palms. She screamed in frustrated rage, a sound abruptly cut off by the wave that slapped her face, filling her mouth with salty water, burning her eyes.

And then she was sucked through the window. She fought to hold her head above water as another wave dropped down on top of her head. The weight of her clothing wrapped her body in extra weight and she struggled to reach the surface. By the time she came up for air, the current had begun to carry her away from the house. Precious seconds were lost as she coughed, struggling to pull air into her burning lungs. She heard a tremendous crack, like the sound of a great tree falling to the axe. She turned toward the sound and watched in horror as the dark blotch of her house crumbled and slid into the ocean.

Adrian threw her head back and screamed wordlessly at the sky, slapping the palms of her hand against the surface of the water in a fit of impotent fury. Belatedly, she realized her hands were empty. The bag was gone. Adrian ceased fighting then, and in reward for capitulation, felt a languid warmth steal into her body. The cold eased away, filling her with an empty euphoria that lent her body a false sense of buoyancy.

“I’m done,” she whispered.

Don't

“Don’t,” she said.

Shock hit me like a splash of ice cold water, poured down into my stomach, temporarily numbing the bruising pain. Despite the cold, I could still feel the insult of the warm, sticky blood that seeped between my legs.

“Don’t,” she repeated, closing her eyes and rolling away from me. She dragged the blankets up to her ears, muffling her voice, but I heard her next words clearly. “Don’t say another word.”

“Don’t.” I forced the word out through clenched teeth as I struggled to escape the hot, hard body that pressed mine against the cold tiles of the bathroom wall. “Let me go.”

He pressed harder, wedging one of his thighs between mine. I moaned softly as he tightened his grip on my wrists, bones grinding under the pressure. Rage burned inside me, adding fuel to my struggles and I twisted in his grip. I tore one of my wrists free, ignoring the burn of his nails scraping across my skin. I dug my elbow into his belly and warm breath whooshed past my ear. Before I could land a second blow, he slammed my head against the wall. Pain licked inside my skull as my cheekbone hit the tile with enough force to disorient me for a few seconds.

Time slowed and I was still. My heart thudded in my chest, echoed in the pressure building in my temples. I could feel his heartbeat as well, the pulse of it sneaking into my body, forcing my tempo to match his.

“Please,” I pleaded, trying to reason with the man I had known since days of penny candy and kickball. “Don’t do this.”

“Please, Mom, don’t do this.” I stretched out on the bed beside the lump of her, spooning my body against her back. She huddled there, a small form nearly lost in the sadness and shadows of the room. I could feel her heartbeat, ponderous and gentle, slipping into my body with a drugged ease.

An orange prescription bottle sat on the night table next to the bed. I wondered how many she had taken today. Not that it mattered. Each day, just a bit at a time, the pills ate away at my mom, leaving in her place a sleepy, shuffling zombie. I was at a loss for answers. She had always been a strong, capable woman but one day, when she walked in the door from work, I could see something in her had changed. She always looked tired, but that day her eyes were empty, her shoulders rounded in a slump. She was quiet at dinner and as soon as we were finished, she had gone up to bed. My two younger brothers thought nothing of it, concerned only with who could get to the Nintendo first.

Life was not easy on my mom. Three kids and never enough money to feed and clothe us. A husband who was rarely home and when he was, the odor of alcohol flavored his nasty words. I knew she was broken but I had faith that because she was Mom, everything would be fine. She was a woman who fixed stuff. She kissed scrapes and bruises, fixed problems, ran a home and had a good job.

My mom had always been my life, the other half of my soul. Not in a creepy, Norma Bates sort of way, and not in a way I fully understood, but we were connected by something stronger than the familial bond. Perhaps it was because it had been the two of us for years before there was a Dad and brothers. It was an odd sort of awareness, a tickle at the back of the mind that was constantly there. It was a knowledge of another, intuiting moods and feelings, but also a *knowing*.

Knowing before she arrived home that it had been a bad day at work, or knowing when she'd fought with Dad even though I'd not be anywhere near her or the fight, but I'd know.

The bond went the other way, too. Once, when I was thirteen or so, I'd gotten pneumonia and the chicken pox. I was in school when I first started to feel a pain in my back. At first, it was a low, dull ache in the lower right, over my hip. But as the day progressed, the pain became more intense. I couldn't get comfortable at my desk and I was fidgeting constantly. The teacher finally sent me off to the nurse.

I barely remember the walk down the quiet hallway. I was wearing my first pair of high heels. I'd saved for months for a pair of brown leather Oxfords, and the wooden heels clunked on the floor, sending an echo down the empty hall ahead of me. My body was not accustomed to the posture the heels forced on my spine and combined with the pain in my back, I was nearly folded in half.

I began to cry, scalding tears running down cheeks that felt as if I'd spent too long in the sun. I was gasping for breath as the tears clogged my nose, creating enormous pressure in my temples. There was an iron band drawing tight around my lungs, making it impossible to get enough air. I had never felt so tired, so much pain. I had nearly reached the nurse's office when the doors at the end of the hall opened and my mother stepped through. I stopped, leaning against the locker, gaping open mouthed.

Months later, it occurred to me to ask her how she had known to come get me.

She was sitting at the kitchen table doing a crossword. One of her few indulgences was to buy a TV Guide each week. Her head was bent forward, the sun from the window to her left absorbed into her hair. I slid into the chair across from her.

“Mom?” I waited patiently for an answer as she continued filling in the blocks. In pen. Always in pen.

“Hmm?” She finally looked up, tapping the pen on the magazine. Otherwise, the house was quiet.

“How did you know I was sick?” Sick didn’t quite describe the hell I was still recovering from. The older the person, the worse it is to get the chicken pox virus. I had pox over every spare inch of my body, under my eyelids, in my ears, on my scalp and inside my throat. They even crawled between my legs. I also had pneumonia severe enough that I couldn’t get out of bed on my own for more than a week.

She focused her gaze on me, a tiny smile crinkling the edges of her hazel eyes. She looked almost embarrassed and the pale skin over her cheeks pinked up. She looked back down at the TV Guide but then pen had stopped tapping.

“When I was young, I was very sick,” she said, putting down the pen. She rose, picking up her empty tea cup and carrying it to the sink. “First, the doctors told me I wouldn’t live to see 18.”

I hadn’t heard this story before. My mother had never been sick. I couldn’t recall a cold or a virus, despite all the germs my brothers and I brought home. I waited while she put the kettle on the stove and set out a spoon and a tea bag beside her mug. She had a ritual for making tea and wouldn’t be interrupted unless someone was bleeding. Badly.

“Then, when I turned 18, they told me I would never have children.” Her hands were steady, but there was a slightly hoarse tone to her voice that I had never heard before. I didn’t dare to move or interrupt her in any way. She rarely spoke of her childhood, always saying it was in the past so it wasn’t important. This was the closest she had ever come. “And when I got pregnant with you, they told me that you would die before you could be born.”

Her hand shook slightly as she poured the boiling water over the bag in her cup. She dunked the bag in a precise tempo. “When you were born, the doctors said it was because I was the most stubborn woman they had ever met. That I had willed you into being. Whatever the reason, you were...you *are* extremely precious to me. And I think because it was just you and I for so long, we bonded in a way that’s different. Stronger. And if you ever repeat this to your brothers, I will deny it. Got it?” She frowned at me. I nodded.

“There are times when I just know. I can’t explain it or tell you how I do it. I just do.” Finished with her preparation, she took her place once more at the table. “I heard someone say you needed me.”

“Are you telling me you hear voices in your head?” I didn’t try to hide my smile. She ignored my humor.

“No, it wasn’t a voice but I don’t know of any other way to describe it. Have you ever been almost asleep and heard someone say your name?” I nodded, a little uncomfortable now. It had happened to me often enough that I sometimes wondered if I was crazy. “Like that,” she said. “Not real, but still loud enough to wake you up. And it said I needed to go get you as soon as possible.” She said it so matter-of-factly that I believed her.

“I know that voice.” I said it quietly, looking down at the table. It was covered with a cheap, plastic cloth sprinkled with ugly pink mutant flowers. There was a small tear in it that leaked fine white fibers and I picked at them as I spoke. “It tells me when you’re sad, or when you have a headache. Or when you’re mad at me for something.”

She leaned forward and placed her hand over mine. Her skin was warm, slightly rough but our hands were nearly identical in shape and size. “You weren’t supposed to be, and that makes you special. Now go away and let me finish my puzzle in peace.”

She forgot, as she willed herself to sleep to death, that she was killing me as well. The sadness in her pulled at me, dragging me down in the sullen darkness. The house reflected the shambles that was the new mom. More and more of the responsibility for the house and the family fell on my shoulders. My new mom shuffled through in the morning, a walking shamble that dressed itself and went to work. The zombie that arrived home would be in such an advanced state of decay that it would shuffle in the door and straight for the bottle of little orange pills. Shadows followed her through the house as she would turn the lights off on her way back to bed.

I knew she was lost in the warrens and tunnels of the piled quilts on her bed, but I needed her. I needed her to lick my wounds in a way I was not equipped to do for myself. I needed her to do the mom thing and tell me it would be all right as she glued the pieces of my brokenness back together. I wrapped an arm over her form and pressed my face against the back of her neck, inhaling deeply of her sleepy, drugged mom scent.

I felt his lips brush the back of my neck, a soft touch against rebelliously receptive nerve endings. Despite myself, I shivered, adrenaline heightening the erotic reaction. I felt my cheeks burn with shame. I hated Louis with every atom of my being and now, I hated myself just as much.

Louis was part of the group of neighborhood kids I ran with, although we were never friends. I was a hardcore tomboy, which was probably fortunate as there were no other girls living in the neighborhood. I didn't know how to relate to girls anyway, had never cared about dolls and ruffles. I built forts, climbed trees, participated in rock fights. I spent endless hours on the basketball court preparing for my future goal of becoming the Celtics first female forward.

I was twelve, but I'd already begun my growth spurt. Because my family spawns Amazonian shaped women, I towered over boys my age. My height was handy on the basketball court because it meant, despite my sex, I never had a shortage of pickup games. I'd formed a bond with two of the neighborhood boys, Kirk and Eric, forged by hours spent sharing a basketball under the netless rim someone had hung on a telephone pole.

Dusk was falling, and while technically, the streetlights were only flickering, the three of us knew that any minute the lights would come on full and mothers along the street were going to start bellowing out dinner calls and curfews. It worked rather like a telegraph signal; all it took was for one mother to call for her kids and the signal would move along the row of houses until we couldn't pretend deafness any longer.

It was close timing, but the humid, summer night meant that the inside of our houses would be stifling. Kirk, Eric and I were still on the basketball court. I stood on the free throw line and dribbled the basketball slowly, feeling the nubby leather conform to my sweaty palm. The ting of

the ball as it bounced off the asphalt echoed off the walls of the houses around us, adding its tune to the music of the peepers warming up for their evening concert. With my free hand I pulled the cotton t-shirt away from my skin. When I'd left the house that morning, the shirt had been yellow. It was now filthy, covered in dirt and grass stains. I look down at my equally filthy shorts and skinned knees, all of which were likely to earn me a sad head shake from a mother who still longed for ruffled, pink dresses and perfectly combed blond curls.

We'd been playing for about an hour and the hot summer air wrapped the three of us in a layer of heavy sweat and sticky dirt. By now we were all tired and hungry, but none of us would break until our respective mothers bellowed. Kirk and Eric faced me, one on each wing of the court. Because of the uneven numbers, we'd been taking turns at a 2 on 1 pickup, tossing the ball sluggishly back and forth rather than keeping score. I saw Kirk pause to wipe the sweat from his face and push the heavy auburn curls back from his forehead. The instant his attention was off me, I started forward, pushing to the right into the hole of his inattention. I felt him try to recover as I attempted to drive the ball around him and he pushed me into Eric.

"Foul!" I bellowed as I stumbled, attempting a hook shot in the general direction of the hoop. Too late. Eric's hand slapped the ball out of the air. I was the quickest of the three of us, but not always fast enough to escape flying arms and elbows. I let Kirk chase after the ball and backed up to lean against the telephone pole on which the rusty hoop hung. My stomach growled audibly and I swear I heard an answering growl come from my left. I shot a grin at Eric, noticing for the first time that we had an audience.

"I wanna play," he said in a curiously flat tone. He was a lanky boy with dusky skin. His eyes were dark, beautiful but they pinned me to the spot as if I were a moth on velvet display. A

bit intimidated, I tossed him the ball in silent invitation. He caught it easily, rolling it under his arm but he made no move to join our game. "I'm not playin' with no girl."

"What's the matter, afraid a girl might kick your ass?" My words dripped with as much sarcasm as I could muster. I planted my fists indignantly on my still nonexistent hips.

"It's my hoop, and my friends." He said this as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "And girls don't play basketball."

"Fuck you," I responded. I had just learned this new phrase and I was extremely proud of myself for the casual way the unfamiliar words rolled off my tongue. I had also acquired another talent from my new friends, and used it now to draw deep from my throat and sinuses to spit a glob of mucous on the cement at Louis' feet.

Louis raised the ball as if to throw it at me and the other two boys, who had been silent until now, chimed in with peacemaking efforts. It was obvious that the dominant male had arrived. Louis relented finally and we began a game of two on two. About thirty seconds in, out of the corner of my eye I saw Louis set a pick behind me. Without thinking, I knocked my hip into him, pushing him backwards and off balance. He tripped over his shoelace and landed on his butt. His elbows made a sandpapery sound as he slid over the pavement. I stared at him, horrified, but wasn't given a chance to react before he picked himself up with a curse and tackled me. We crashed to the asphalt in a flurry of skinned elbows and flying fists.

The fight lasted about as long as the game had. In the end, I was left bruised and bloody, but it was Louis who ran home with a black eye and bloody nose. It was my first real fight, and it hurt. Inside and out.

Often, we manage to channel the violence into the basketball and the game. If it got a bit rough on the court, well, it was all just a game. Words and shoves were just that, and there was no uneasy truce, just a sharing of space and friends.

We were about sixteen the last time we played together. In the preceding year, I had lost my height advantage as the three boys began to grow like the straggly weeds that inched through the cracks of the court. I was a starting forward for the girls' high school varsity team, but only because the boys' coach refused to let me try out. I had to practice long hours to maintain and sharpen the skills that now came naturally to the three boys. I'd never let go of the ridiculous idea of becoming a professional basketball player.

In Louis' opinion, basketball was a man's game, and my absolute joy and obsession was something of a personal affront to him. He only tolerated my presence as a placeholder, a fourth body on the court.

It was late August, and we no longer had to go straight home when the streetlights came on. Our mothers' knew where we were by the persistent tinging echo that bounced up and down the street. We played two on two, Kirk and I against Louis and Eric. There was little sound but for the sound of panting or the scuff of a sneaker in the loose gravel that sneaked onto the court. The crescendo of frogs and peepers grew steadily louder with the gathering shadows, but the game was tied 10-all. One point before dinner and a long, cold shower.

Louis and I made it nearly a year without escalating into physical violence, but it was hot, and we were all tired and hungry. Elbows were flying and the game gradually denigrated into a shoving match with a side of basketball. None of us were willing to concede the game but we were evenly matched teams. Eric stood at the free throw line, dribbling slowly towards me. Kirk was off to my left and I could hear Louis panting behind me.

At that age, no matter how much I might have wished it otherwise, it was impossible to dismiss the difference in sex when physical exertion, sweat and competition brought our bodies into contact. When Louis put a hand at the small of my back, his touch burned through my thin cotton t-shirt. I was aware of him in a disturbing new way. Too disturbing to contemplate deeply, but it was there. I backed up, forcing him to keep pace and tensed to make a run at Erik. If I could steal the ball when he went in for a layup, I could end the game and find out whose grill was sending a beefy call to home.

We'd been playing together a long time and Louis read my intent in my posture. His hand left my back and he snaked his arm around the front of my waist. He picked me up and carried me effortlessly off the court as Erik went in for the score. I felt warmth rising from someplace deep and low, felt a residual handprint throbbing at the base of my spine, and squashed the feelings under anger. As I shoved away from him, I was aware of the three of them laughing as if it were all good fun. Perhaps to Erik and Kirk, it was. But there was an underlying tone of nastiness in Louis' laughter, a self-satisfaction at knowing he was now physically superior to me. And now he was certain I knew it.

In a parody of my twelve-year-old self, I drew deep and spit a fat, slimy glob onto his sneaker. It sounded as though even the peepers drew in and held a gulp of air, waiting, as the shiny goo trailed over the toe of his dirty white Nikes. I couldn't take my eyes off it, hadn't even known what I was going to do until the spit was already flying. I felt my eyes burn, as close to tears in front of them as I'd ever been. It was stupid, really, and had Louis waited one more second, I would have apologized.

Next thing I knew, I was flat on my back in the middle of the street, my head cracking off the pavement. I had two brothers, and I'd fought more than once with Louis, so I knew how to

throw a punch and take one in return. I had rudimentary couch wrestling skills acquired from many Friday nights, the same two brothers and WWF. I'd always held my own on the basketball court, and I never cried. Not until I got home, anyway.

Louis used his weight to pin me beneath him, his thighs like iron as they pressed into my ribcage. I could feel the residual heat from baked asphalt bleeding into my skin through the thin layer of my clothes. I was unprepared for the force behind the first punch, bursting stars brightening my vision as his fist slammed into my cheekbone, and another into my side before I could defend. The pain was incredible but it also acted like a match to the fuse. Heedless of my skin and the blows he was landing, I bucked and twisted, punching at him wildly. Failing to make any impression, I resorted to fighting like a girl. I turned my head to the right, one of his fists glancing off my ear as I twisted. His shorts had ridden up his thigh during the struggle and I sank my teeth deep into the meat of Louis' thigh. I tasted salt, sweaty male and a coppery flavor that made my tongue curl and my mouth water. He screamed, and involuntary tears filled my eyes as he buried his hand in my hair and pulled.

His weight lifted off me, although he took a good handful of my hair before he let go. Eric dragged him a few feet away and Kirk leaned over me to offer a hand. There was a queer look in his eyes. He had the liquid brown eyes of a dog, eyes that always had a smile or a plan behind them. Now, the smile had disappeared and he looked angry. I thought he was mad at me, but I hadn't started the fight. Had Louis dragged one of those two off the court that way, we'd still be waiting for the wrestling match to end.

I rose and slapped his hand away. It was probably that look that made me shove him and launch myself at Louis once more. I was making wordless sounds, a growling rage that came from my gut. I swung a right hook that caught Louis in the nose, and my hand flared with white-hot

pain. The crunch of cartilage was satisfying, and I would have gone after his face with my teeth if Erik and Kirk had not dragged me off him.

Louis stood there under the streetlamp, his hand held in front of his face. Blood trickled from his nose, meandering over his lips and down his chin. He ignored it and instead, slowly unraveled the long blond strands my hair from his fingers. There was a superior smirk on his face, but he didn't look at me again as Kirk and Erik each grabbed one of my arms and practically hustled me up the street. Erik broke off three houses down to disappear into his front door, but Kirk continued past his house. He walked slightly behind me, as if to prevent me from escaping past him back to the court. My eyes burned and shimmered with liquid, and there was a hitch in my lungs that almost sounded like a sob.

He stopped at the corner of my yard, but I ignored him as I cut across the lawn towards the back porch. I would not cry, but I couldn't keep that faith if I turned and saw that cool look in his eyes again. I heard him say something but when I half-turned, I saw his shadow slip across the street in the direction of his house.

I eased through the back door and into the bathroom that was just off the kitchen. I hadn't seen my mother. Off to the left, I saw my two brothers glued to the television, but neither looked up as I passed. The door to the basement stood open, which likely meant my mother was in the Dungeon of Laundry. I was afraid if I was caught looking like this, I was going to have to endure another of her endless lectures on the wonders of femininity.

I sat on the rim of the bathtub, slowly unlacing my sneakers. I really had no idea why tears were leaking from my eyes. I was not crying.

There was a knock on the door and I started guiltily.

“What?” I snapped in my bitchiest big sister voice. My mother respected privacy and closed doors, but she didn’t hold much for bitchy sister. The door slid open and I ducked my head, letting my sweaty hair fall forward in an attempt to hide my face.

I heard her step in and slide the door closed behind her. She took a face cloth from the closet and ran it under the water in the sink. She turned the water off and stood waiting. I heard the command as clearly as if it had been spoken and rose, covering the short distance between us to join her in front of the sink. I faced away from the mirror. Maybe if I didn’t have to see it, it wouldn’t be so bad.

My mother was a small woman. When I wanted to earn her affectionate wrath, I’d wrap my arms around her and rest my chin on top of her head. My mother had the thickest head of hair of anyone I knew, nearly all silver now. I loved to rest my chin there and hold her squirming with indignation. Now it was me who squirmed as she rested a hand on my shoulder, reaching up to wipe the cloth across my cheekbone. I saw my wince mirrored in her eyes, as the cut she cleaned pained her own flesh. I started to speak but there was The Look. I swallowed the words and surrendered to her process. Years of arguments and pleading played out silently between us.

“You’re too old to be running wild with the boys at all hours of the day and night!” she lectured, waving a fork at me across the dinner table.

“You’re a girl. When are you going to act like it?” she scolded, brandishing the pair of jeans she was patching at the knee.

“You’re a girl,” she bemoaned, as we bypassed dresses in the department store, and headed to the boys’ section for Levi’s and sneakers.

“You’re a girl.” She spoke now with a sad finality. She wiped almost roughly at my tears, scrubbing away my sadness. “You knew the day was coming when you were going to push one of them too far. Now look.” She dropped the now pinked facecloth into the sink, her cool hands turning me towards the mirror.

The girl in the mirror was awkward, dirty. She wore a grey boy’s tank top, the front speckled with drying blood. Her blond hair hung limp and greasy in her face, blue eyes watery and red rimmed, defensive. Her left cheekbone was swollen, and an ugly red welt promised a palette of purple come morning. Her lips, she noted with useless pride, did not tremble but there was dried blood in one corner.

“Enough. If you don’t stay away from those boys, I’ll have to send your Father over.” It wasn’t a threat. I knew she’d send him and I knew with his temper he was likely to beat the hell out of whichever of the boys he got his hands on first. It wouldn’t matter who was guilty. Only one person was allowed to lay hands on me. For my mother to use this against me was a measure of the depth of her intent.

I didn’t reply as I turned away from her, and the bedraggled girl in the mirror, to fiddle with the faucets to the shower.

As we went to separate high schools, I didn’t see Louis again for another two years. It took skill to avoid someone who lived only four houses away but I managed. I didn’t return to the neighborhood court again, and instead rode my bike to the glass encrusted courts in the projects. I had to bribe my brothers quite a bit to keep that tidbit from my mother. If I passed Kirk or Erik on the street, we’d greet each other but much beyond that and it became awkward.

After graduation, my father's temper became more than my mother was willing to bear. He'd left one night and that was it. No phone calls, no paychecks and no way for my mother to pay a mortgage and feed three teenagers. Rather than a college sweatshirt, I now sported the bland khaki uniform of a Kentucky Fried Chicken employee. I'd worked there for about six months but because I worked hard, I'd already earned the title of head cashier. It was extra money in my pay, meaning there was occasionally left over for pizza for me and my brothers on Friday nights.

It was my responsibility to train new hires, so when my boss Cindy called out that she had a new trainee for me, I felt a spurt of nerves. I actually liked my job, but I didn't like having someone shadow me or look to me for instruction. But I wasn't about to let a new person see that and I schooled my face into a polite smile as I stepped out of the stockroom where I'd been doing inventory. I stepped directly into the path of a warm, solid body that knocked me backwards. I jerked an arm up to catch my balance and felt a rough grip around my upper arm as I was caught and pulled upright.

I jerked my arm away because the grip actually hurt and looked up into Louis' fierce, dark eyes.

"Fuck," I groaned slowly and then immediately regretted it as Cindy spluttered my name in shock. I felt like a mouse pinned down by the mesmerizing gaze of Louis' cobra eyes, and barely registered her reprimand. Louis grinned, lips peeling back to expose his fangs as he draped a heavy arm over my shoulder with a good deal more force than was necessary.

"She's kidding," he said to Cindy as he hugged my stiff body to his side. "We grew up together, been friends forever. She's practically a sister to me." I opened my mouth to call him a liar but realized he was saving my ass and closed it again. He had neatly set a pick for me. When

Cindy turned away, he lifted his arm and shoved me away, brushing at his side with exaggerated motions as though trying to clean my cooties off.

In the three days it took to train him, we spoke only the bare minimum to each other. After that, we functioned quite well pretending the other did not exist.

He still hadn't broken our mutually imposed silence, not when his lips moved from the base of my neck, nor when they brushed just behind my earlobe. His teeth lightly nipped the delicate nerve endings and I felt my toes curl inside my sneakers. My only experiences with sex had come in the awkward, and often painful, fumble and thrust of adolescent exploration. Sex, in my opinion, was messy and not worth all the fuss and trouble. I'd never experienced anything like the coil of white hot tension now pulsing between my legs as Louis' warm breath moved the ends of my hair.

Desire and shame consumed the fuel of the hatred I'd carried for two years, ate up the remembered bruises and pains (some deserved, some not) of our fights, chewed away the silent barrier that stood between us. It became a conflagration of a hateful lust.

I wanted to fuck him. Face pressed up against a cold tile wall, in a filthy bathroom only feet away from a dining room full of customers and coworkers, my cheek already throbbing in such a way that I knew I'd wear Louis' mark for weeks, and I could think of nothing but fucking him. I wanted to dominate him with my body, force him to submit to my fledgling femininity, show him what it was like to be beneath. I wanted to bruise him with my lips, hands and body in a way I no longer could through brute strength. I wanted to take him deep inside me, sheath him in my poison and in his moment of male surrender, I wanted to sink my teeth into his throat and drink in a rush of hot fluid.

He sensed the shift, but misread my intention. He loosened his grip long enough to spin me around to face him before pinning me with my back to the wall. I forgot to struggle as he forced my arms up over my head once more. I forgot because his lips came down on mine in the same instant, burning my lips in the most brutal and arousing kiss I had ever experienced. I could taste his anger as his tongue pushed past my lips, and as my tongue met his, I felt our anger merge into something out of our control.

I bit down hard, catching his lower lip between my teeth. I felt another lick of flame searing at my self-control as I tasted sweet, salty blood. He released my wrists and drew his hand back to strike me. Before he could, I dropped my arms to his shoulders and drew him close to lick the wound.

I hadn't felt him untuck my shirt, but his hand burned my skin as it slid up my ribcage and came to rest just beneath the barrier of my bra. I felt my nipple stiffen and ache for him to slide his hand up just a bit further. I pulled back as far as I could, catching his wrist in a mockery of his earlier capture.

"Don't." My voice was uneven, confusion and desire straining my vocal cords. "Not here, in the middle of a filthy bathroom."

"Mom." I shook her shoulder, and rose up on one elbow to peer over the mound of her. "He raped me." I couldn't believe the words myself as they slid coldly out of my mouth. Too calm, too unreal to be believed. I had only wanted comfort, but her denial of me was too much. "In that middle of that filth," I said, not sure if I meant the bathroom, or myself, "he raped me."

“Don’t say another word.” For the span of the command, there was the woman who lived before pills and blankets. She rose up on one elbow, turning her head to look over her shoulder but oddly, she did not look directly at me. “Do not say another word.” She enunciated each syllable and word that thrust into my heart. “Because I don’t want to be forced to disbelieve you.”

I stared at the back of her head as she turned away and lay back down. I was frozen as she pulled away from the cocoon of my body, and yanked the blankets back up until all that was left was a tuft hair poking out from beneath the hem.

I heard the words clatter and beat within the confines of my skull as I slid out of her bed and slunk out of the shadowed room. I closed the door very gently behind me.

“Who’s gonna know?” Louis sneered, and the arrogance in his tone erased the lust, leaving the emptiness to be filled with disgust, with myself and with him.

“I’ll tell Cindy you won’t leave me alone to do my work.” My mouth was dry and my tongue felt swollen and clumsy. Even as the childish threat left my mouth, I knew it was empty. I was trying the disguise the old fear, to pretend I wasn’t afraid of him, hadn’t lived in suppressed fear of him for the last two years.

“She’s not going to believe a stupid slut like you.” His hand, still under my shirt, moved suddenly and squeezed my breast painfully. His fingers dug deep into the soft flesh with bruising pressure. I blinked rapidly to ease the sting in my eyes. “Besides, you’ve been asking for it for years.”

I stood naked before a full length mirror, shivering violently as I took survey of my war wounds. My cheek on the right side of my face was swollen, an ugly red-purple bruise that burst high over the bone. There were five perfect fingerprint marks at the base of my throat and a deep bite mark where my neck met my shoulder. I smiled, but there was no humor in it, imagining foaming at the mouth with rabies as I exacted my revenge of madness upon Louis. I considered the bruises and welts, feeling as if I'd been thrust back through the years to our first engagement. In an ugly reenactment, Louis had reached deep inside my body in an attempt to break me; this time, he had succeeded.

"You've been asking for it for years," I told the ugly young woman in the mirror, before bending over the sink to scrub furiously at a pair of bloody underwear.

The words haunted my dreams, waking and not. Every time I closed my eyes, I felt his hand at my throat, choking the air from me until darkness stole my resistance. In the dark of my bedroom, huddled under the weight of my blankets, I saw my image reflected in the bathroom mirror as Louis tossed me across the cramped bathroom. I felt a lingering ache in my ribs where I'd struck the sink before falling to the slimy floor. I could smell the disinfectant I'd been using to clean, seared into my nostrils along with the greasy scent that clings to every surface in a fast food restaurant. I heard the weakness in my voice as I pleaded, begged, as he tore the buttons from my work chinos. Over and over I relived the absolute defeat of offering him supplication in my quiet tears, as he knocked my head against the floor over and over until I ceased struggling. There weren't enough blankets to warm chill of the cold tile floor on my back, never enough heat to erase the memory of the cold looks of my coworkers as I'd slunk out the back door of the restaurant with no explanation.

When I returned to work the day after, I had attempted to tell my manager what happened. Louis was right; she didn't want to hear any of it, and refused to hear me out. The past threatened to drown me when she told me that she would not get in the middle of our private squabble. I tried to convince her the war was over, but the way she looked at me told me, "You asked for it." I wasn't sure she was wrong. I said nothing further, and in fact only spoke when necessary thereafter.

I said nothing to my mother when my period was late. I rarely spoke at home anymore, wrapped in my own private iceberg of isolation. As I burrowed deeper and deeper under the covers of my bed, my mom began to emerge from hers. When I went to work, I did so with shoulders hunched against the stares and nasty comments. Once Louis had told everyone I'd spread my legs for him, I was treated as the workplace slut.

At first, when the sickness came I could sneak into the bathroom. Often, the retching was intensified by being forced to puke in the same bathroom that haunted me day and night. When I finally fainted in the middle of a shift, I think my manager was relieved to be rid of me. Soon after my shifts were whittled away, bit by bit.

The first time I tried to kill myself, my inspiration came from television. I drew a hot bath, and lined the inner rim of the tub with candles. I added bubble bath and perfume. I carefully removed the razor blades from their spring container and set them precisely along the opposite edge of the tub. The water was scalding hot but it still wasn't enough to get me clean. I could scrub my skin raw, and did, but I couldn't wash it away. My sin was living inside of me, beyond reach of a wash cloth or soap.

I picked up one of the razor blades and dipped it in to the soapy water to dull the shine of the metal. I gripped the blade so tightly my fingertips went numb but no matter how hard I pressed,

how hard I wanted, I could not break the skin at my wrists. Instead, I pressed the blade against the swell of my stomach, leaving a map of shallow, crisscrossed bloody lines.

I rose from the tub and wrapped a towel around myself. I gathered the blades that still winked, clean and accusing, in the flickering candlelight. I tossed them in the trash, along with the extinguished candles. Even as black as it felt, I could not conceive of the horror my mother would have to endure if I bled out in the tub. She acted as if I'd never whispered confessions, as if all truths and lies spoken to the cocoon were absorbed, my sins eaten and disposed of. Yet I just...couldn't.

The next night I took an entire bottle of aspirin. No muss and fuss, no mess, no cowardice to drop the blade. No chance of screwing it up. The relief was beyond immense, a universal feeling that stretched a few minutes of time into the infinity of nothingness. My sin, the shame, and the awful dirty feeling that lingered on my skin faded away as I crawled into my bed. I thought I would sleep, easy as that.

It was a good, deep sleep, free of nightmares and bruising memories. When I woke, it was to absolute silence, deep night so black that there was nothing to see. If this was hell, it was immeasurably quiet, peaceful. I believed it could only be hell. I could have rested there for eternity, nothing and no one.

Then nausea came, fast and brutal. Alive, I dropped from the bed to the floor and crawled out of my room and down the stairs. I was halfway to the bathroom when the world melted. When I woke again, I was shivering violently, my throat convulsing with the need to vomit. Unable to even crawl now, I wormed my way the remaining 20 feet to the bathroom. I pulled myself up, but it exhausted whatever I had left and I ended up slumped over the toilet, my face inches from the water as I retched violently, over and over.

When my mother found me in the morning, I was still retching weakly, but damnably alive. My old mom helped me to clean up and assisted me to bed. As she tucked me in to bed, there was a moment when I wanted to burst into tears, to have her take me in her arms and make it better. My mother's Band-Aids came in all sizes, surely she could fix this, too. Instead, I lay numb and silent, letting her assume I had the flu.

She believed me when, the following week, I told her I was working a double shift and would be gone for sixteen hours or so. I had never lied so baldly to my mother before, not about anything serious. This went well beyond lying about a stolen piece of candy or the true origin of a black eye. This was probably the kind of lie that would break us forever.

Before I left that morning, I was aware of her studying me. We were in the kitchen, and she was packing her lunch for work when she suddenly stopped, staring at me as if seeing me, really seeing me, again. She stepped toward me, reaching out to grasp my upper arms. I flinched instinctively, revolted by the intimacy of the touch.

"Are you ok?" She searched my face but there was no answer there. "Talk to me."

I stepped back and pulled my arms from her grip. I grabbed my bag and fled out the back door.

Lying to everyone else was easy. I lied to the councilors at Family Planning, and spun a great story of teenage drunkenness and unprotected sex. I endured the safe sex lecture. I lied when I told them I had no regrets about my decision. I lied to the nurses who asked if I had a ride home, who were concerned with my very fictional support system. I lied to myself when I convinced myself that ridding my womb of Louis would rid me of the nightmare.

I took the bus home from Boston, barely registering the trip. I walked slowly from the bus stop to work, four blocks suddenly stretching four hundred miles. I had no idea how I was going to make it through a shift at work, but I was committed to the lie. I had nowhere to go but home but that would mean risking exposure. When I arrived at work, a flustered manager called me into the office. She had been fielding phone calls all day from my mother. I wasn't allowed to start the shift until I had gotten her off the manager's back.

I was numb, the sharp edges of my mind dulled by a lingering feeling of being drugged, and a sadness so heavy that it twisted into deep, visceral cramps in my womb. I had no idea how I was going to lie my way free of this. My mother never called me at work and I couldn't imagine why today should have been any different.

I rested my forehead against the cool metal of the payphone box, absorbing the out of focus reflection of my eyes in the dull, metal plating. The phone barely rang once before she picked it up.

"Where have you been all day?" she demanded, bypassing greeting or identification. She knew who was calling, and I felt that odd tug in the back of my mind, in the place she used to occupy. "You said you'd be at work all day."

"I didn't feel like it. You're always telling me to take a hooky day. So I did." I grasped for a name, any name. "Me and Tammy went to the mall," I said, lighting on the name of a casual friend she'd met once or twice. I was grasping and she knew it.

"Tammy called today, looking for you." There was no accusation, no demand in the statement, just a quiet knowing. I struggled with the gathering tears; if the tears broke free, what would hold back the truth?

She spoke my name, quietly. I felt a twist of premonition, and almost hung up then.

“Where,” she began, but then paused as if reconsidering. Then she blurted, “Did you have an abortion today?”

Her words blew the remaining foggiess from my brain, and cleared away confusion. She was a woman, too, with her own pains and problems. She was no longer just mom, who could fix everything. She didn’t need to know this thing. She didn’t need to know that she had failed the image of perfection I had once held. I felt as though I had failed her as well.

She started to speak again but I interrupted her, irritated despite my sudden understanding. “We went shopping. I left her at the mall and took the bus to work.”

“Then why,” she tried once more.

“Don’t,” I said as I gently replaced the receiver into the cradle.